

FAITH HEALING AND HEALING FAITH

Scriptures: II Corinthians 12:7b-10; II Corinthians 4:7-11

There is a back story to our second scripture lesson. In II Corinthians Paul has to defend his authority as an apostle against false teachers in Corinth. He does this by boasting of his credentials. In chapter 10 he points out that he was the first apostle to share the message of Jesus in Corinth. Then in chapter 11 he describes in amazing detail how hard he worked and how much he suffered in order to bring them the gospel. Finally, in the first 6½ verses of chapter 12 he talks about a special vision or revelation of heaven that was given to him. Basically Paul says that if anyone has proven their faith in Jesus, he has. That point will be crucial later on in the sermon. Now turn to our second scripture lesson: II Corinthians 12, starting in the middle of verse 7.

(Read II Corinthians 12:7b-10)

There is a story of a faith healer who invited people from the audience to come forward and receive prayer for healing. Two men came up. One, a man named Fred, came up on crutches. He could not walk without the crutches. The other, a man named Phil, stuttered. The faith healer sent both men behind a short curtain and prayed for them in a loud voice. Then he said, "Fred, you are healed. Throw your crutches over the curtain." One crutch came flying over the curtain and then the other. The audience cheered. Then the faith healer said, "Phil, you are healed of your stammering. Speak to us." There was a pause, and Phil said, "Ffffred fffell."

I thought of that story when I read the Question of Faith for this week. A person in our church, whose son has a serious chronic illness, was told that if she had enough faith her son would be healed. But for years she prayed for her son, and he was never healed. Did that mean she lacked faith? Would we and our loved ones be healed if we only had enough faith and prayed harder?

To answer that question look at the case of the apostle Paul. If anyone had faith, it was Paul. That is the whole point of II Corinthians, chapters 10-13. If anyone could claim to have faith, it was Paul. But three times Paul asked to be healed of some disease. We don't know what kind disease it was, but it must have been painful. Our pew Bible calls it a thorn in the flesh, but a more literal translation of the Greek says it was like a stake driven into the body. Three times Paul asked to be healed of this disease, but he wasn't. Instead God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

I believe there is a difference between faith healing and what I call healing faith. Faith healing uses faith to manipulate God. Faith healing means going through certain rituals, like praying hard enough, to make God give you what you want. Healing faith uses faith to trust God. Healing faith is not about getting something from God; it is about putting your life in God's hands. Faith healing is measured by results. If you are not healed you did not have enough faith. But healing faith is measured by hope. Healing faith is shown by the ability to keep on praying even when healing doesn't happen. Which brings me to the most important difference. Faith healing is always temporary. When someone is healed physically, whether by

a doctor or a faith-healer, the person's health eventually breaks down again. Sooner or later Fred falls. But healing faith is eternal. The person who learns to trust in God's sufficient grace can never have that grace taken away, not even by death.

I think of two situations that happened in our church. Exactly five years ago last week Sandy Riebe was told by a doctor that she had six months to live. She had cancer that had metastasized to her lungs and there was nothing the doctors could do to stop it. At the time she told me we had a prayer. I prayed that God would give her healing, but if not that God would give her extraordinary courage and faith to deal with whatever lay ahead. It never occurred to me that God would answer both prayers. God gave Sandy extraordinary courage and faith, and with it an extraordinary sense of humor. In the middle of what was supposed to be Sandy's last six months I went to a talk that she did for the staff of hospice. It was the most extraordinary talk I have ever heard. At times she had them laughing so hard they were almost doubled over, and at the end there was not a dry eye in the room. God gave Sandy extraordinary faith and courage, and with it an extraordinary sense of humor. Then, much to our shock, God also took away the cancer.

During this time Dick Dahlstrom, a member of our choir, was also diagnosed with a very grim form of cancer. I remember having a similar prayer with Dick: that God would give him healing, or if not that God would give him extraordinary courage and faith. And God gave Dick extraordinary courage and faith and a wonderful sense of humor. I saw Dick's faith at work during his last days in the hospital. During his last days Dick got to know one of the nurses and invited her to our church and she started coming and she even brought her mother. But Dick himself never made it to church again. He died a few days later.

Would you say that Sandy was healed because she had more faith? I don't think so. I think they were both healed, but in different ways.

In a classic book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Harold Kushner, a Jewish rabbi, tells of a terrible disease that attacked his young son Aaron. It was called *progeria*, or "rapid aging." It meant that Aaron would grow old, lose all of his hair, become shriveled and weak, and eventually die all before his 16th birthday. The Kushner's were devastated, and of course they and many others prayed for healing. In one sense that prayer was never answered. Aaron died two days after his 14th birthday. But in another sense the prayer was answered. Kushner writes,

Where do parents get the strength they will need to go on day after day? For that matter, how does the man suffering from inoperable cancer, or the woman with Parkinson's disease, find the strength and sense of purpose to get up and face each new day, when there is no prospect of a happy ending? ...

I believe that God gives us strength and patience and hope, renewing our spiritual resources when they run dry. How else do sick people manage to find more strength and more good humor over the course of prolonged illness than any one person could possibly have, unless God was constantly replenishing their souls? How else do widows find the courage to pick up the pieces of their lives and go out to face the world alone,

when on the day of their husband's funeral, they did not have that courage? How else do parents of a retarded or brain-damaged youngster wake up every morning and turn again to their responsibilities, unless they are able to lean on God when they grow weak? ... One of the things that constantly reassures me that God is real, and not just an idea that religious leaders made up, is the fact that people who pray for strength, hope, and courage so often find resources of strength, hope, and courage that they did not have before they prayed (pp. 127-128).

You see, there is a difference between faith healing and healing faith. Faith healing sometimes works and sometimes doesn't. But healing faith always works, because it heals even when the body isn't healed.

- Ken Onstot
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