

Sermon: On Healing
Scripture: Mark 1:29-34
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: February 8, 2009

In the early morning of January 1st, 1992, I was home from college for the Christmas break and sleeping in bed when the telephone rang and shocked my mom, dad and I out of sleep. I remember listening as dad grabbed the phone first and responded to the voice on the other end with a gasp and I climbed out of bed as my mom ran downstairs to get on the other phone. I knew something bad had happened even before I heard my mom crying on the phone downstairs. It was about my brother David who was in the Peace Corps in Lesotho, Africa and the news was that he was in a clinic somewhere in Zimbabwe with a severe head injury and they were trying to get permission from one government to another to air-lift him to the closest modern hospital in Durban, South Africa. The US government official on the phone was telling my mom and dad that arrangements were being made to fly them over there to be with their son. The sense they left the states with and us kids with was that David would probably not survive the accident. He had been traveling with friends through Zimbabwe in a pick-up truck. His two friends were in the cab and he was sunning himself in the back bed of the truck when the truck edged too far over the side of the road and when his friend tried to get the truck back on the road he turned the wheel too sharp and it flipped throwing David far from the truck and against the rocky embankment.

His head cracked in a number of places and his brain swelled as he laid unconscious in the nearest clinic for about 5 hours waiting to be brought to South Africa. The doctors were amazed that he was still alive when they finally got him to the ICU and they commenced working on him. Over a 6 week time period David teetered between life and death and we would wait for the daily calls from mom and dad to hear the latest news. But during all that time back here in the states we were praying hard for him and there churches all over the country holding him prayer. To the doctors amazement he made it through those 6 weeks and finally became stabilized enough that they could transfer him from South Africa to the hospital in Richmond, Virginia where we lived that happens to specialize in brain issues. Again, the doctors of MCV, these brain specialists,

were disbelieving when they read the records of what had happened and said they'd never seen such a remarkable recovery after so much damage to a brain.

Today David is alive and well, as many of you know since you've met him when he has visited up here. He has his struggles connected with the injury but functions in such a way that you'd hardly know in relating to him. Those of us who know him well know that he is different since then and have supported him in developing techniques for managing his life, practices that are necessary for him to accomplish what most of us take for granted. What I often say is that while I didn't lose a brother in that accident, I did lose an *older* brother because upon his return and since then I've found myself in the role of older brother with him as certain of his developmental processes have been affected.

But I tell you the story to share with you the most striking experience I have had of the power of healing prayer. Of course in any story like this and any claim of the power of healing prayer comes certain questions like;

“What about people who experience a terrible accident like that, receive lots of healing prayer, and don't survive?”

Or

“What's to say that David wasn't just lucky with the particular way his accident happened and he was in seriously good physical condition being a black belt in karate and couldn't his healing had happened regardless of prayers for it?”

Or

“Shouldn't we give credit to the skilled doctors and nurses for their work with David instead of attributing it to supernatural causes?”

And those are just a few of the many questions that can surface and create resistance to claiming the healing power of prayer. And then to compound the issue some of us have heard terrible explanations for why someone didn't get well despite prayers for healing – that the people who were praying didn't have faith enough in God for the prayers to work or worse yet that the subject of the prayers, the person who is sick or broken, didn't have the necessary faith for healing to occur. Or that someone wasn't healed because God wanted to bring them home to Him or they are not healed because they needed to learn and grow from the cross of their particular sickness. And the explanations and theories abound to claim or explain how and why prayer works.

But especially because of the more black and white and pat answers, and because of the images of faith healers we have from the media, especially many of us of the more liberal Christian tradition tend to relegate healing prayer and the healing ministry to the edges of our faith, turning over the practice to the more conservative holy roller edges of Christianity and it's to that relegation that I want to speak this morning.

'Cause I think there are at least 2 reasons why we should draw healing prayer and healing ministry back to the center of our practice as a community of faith. First off, it's a powerful and effective practice that we shouldn't just be sitting on. I personally have had experiences of answered prayer, like the one I just described with my brother but also others, that are too striking in my life to not believe in the power of prayer. And my guess is that if you asked around in this gathered community you would find many who would share a similar experience, maybe most of us even. And while each story probably could be dismissed by the skeptic, if we are to be honest, I think, we have to operate on the assumption that there is a God who cares about this world and us in it and whose power and love through our intercession can in fact impact or influence the daily events of our lives. That we can pray for healing and healing can occur, be that physical, emotional, spiritual, relational.

Yes, there are significant theological questions that surface when you make that claim; like why then is there evil at all in the world if God can act and influence our everyday lives? Why does God allow anything bad to happen? But I think such questions are to be grappled with rather than assuming they are the nails in the coffin of the case. We need to be careful I would say not to rest too heavily on the black and white answers of certain fundamentalist Christians around this topic but conversely we should also be careful not to fall too heavily on the similarly black and white answers of the secular perspective, of those who say "don't be ridiculous, that's superstition and hocus pocus, it can all be explained through scientifically."

So that's one reason why I don't think we should relegate the healing power of prayer to the margins of our faith tradition, because for one thing there's probably enough experience and evidence in this room alone, on this particular Sunday, to at least make a compelling case for the power of prayer in healing the sick and infirm.

But along with that is the centrality of the healing ministry to Jesus' ministry as described in the New Testament, this morning's scripture being just one of the very

many. In fact if you were to ask what is the one thing that seems to mark Jesus' public ministry more than anything else, above his ethical teachings or parable telling, it would be just this – his healing of people. We can call Jesus a great teacher, a model and a prophet, a radical reformer, but if we are going to use the gospels as our source of information for him then we have to call him as much as anything else a healer.

It's one of the central things he sends his disciples out to do and it's one of the central things that happens in the accounts of the early church. People are often attracted to the fledgling Christian community because they experience this remarkable power and love flowing through these people that manifests itself primarily in the act of healing people, healing them from physical, emotion, and spiritual illness.

One of the foremost writers on healing ministry is a man named Frances MacNutt and he says among many, many things, this: "...healing is an integral part of the gospel message itself: if the good news is that Christ came to save all people, then the power to save has to be right here... Christ came to heal us – spirit, mind, emotions, and body. To deny or minimize the healing ministry is to take away the power of the... good news and turn it into merely good advice." The good news that Christ was demonstrating was God's amazing love for us and this love was revealed primarily through healing, through the human being restored – whether that was Simon Peter's mother-in-law or the woman with the blood flow of 12 years, the blind man at the gate to the city, the man with the crippled hand, the little girl who was sick in bed, the man who couldn't walk and the list goes on and on to that very culmination point of Jesus being crucified but finally restored through the resurrection.

MacNutt points out that nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus say to someone – actually your sickness is going to help you grow, you'll learn a lot from it. I'm going to let you stay sick. Instead Jesus sees sickness and illness and the separation from community that it causes every time as decidedly NOT the will of God demonstrating that God desires for each of us health and wholeness. The other thing that is clear in the Gospel of Mark in particular is that Jesus' healing miracles were not about Jesus saying "hey, look how great and powerful I am!" You find as you read through the gospel that Jesus is often telling people to keep it quiet. No, obviously what Jesus is doing is manifesting the love and power of God because he can't help but manifest that love because that's what God wants to manifest in our lives. And so that's what our sacred

scriptures make plain. Isn't it interesting how we in the more liberal Protestant tradition have de-emphasized that significant part of our sacred scriptures? Is it because we are more enlightened than to believe that we can pray for someone and can be instruments of God's healing in their lives? Is it a knee-jerk response to our fundamentalist experiences? Or what?

There is so much more to reflect upon and discuss regarding this significant topic but I guess I'll leave it there this morning inviting us to practice more concertedly healing prayer in our lives and in the church. While we don't have an official healing group in this church there are a number of us who really love to do healing prayer with people and I would hope that you might keep it mind if ever you or someone you know could use it. If you've never had a laying on of hands for healing prayer, then you don't know what you are missing. Outside of the theological arguments for or against it, there is nothing like being surrounded and touched by people who are expressing love for you especially when there is sickness in your body or in your heart. And we have this great gift of community that we can all take advantage of. So you see if you personally find it difficult to believe or accept the power of healing prayer, you can leave it to those of us in the community who are more convinced and you can even stay in that place of skepticism or disbelief and request healing prayer trusting that your fellow community members are holding something that you are less sure of yourself.

So after church this morning a few of us want to make ourselves available for a brief prayer if any of you feel like you need it. Just a brief explanation of what it is you need healing prayer for and then if you are comfortable we'd lay hands on you and just pray for a few minutes together. It's simple and a wonderful thing to receive. Then also a few of us are talking about maybe having a couple of evening healing services sometime during Lent to give the church further opportunity to pray for healing for one another. And then of course the way this happens in this community more than in any other way is that I, as your pastor, am always available to stop by or to set an appointment in my office for prayer of all sorts and specifically for healing prayer. So please let me know if you would appreciate a visit with me. However, as I hope my sermon has made clear this isn't just a clergy thing or preacher thing but something that we are all invited to do for one another as members of the body of Christ, as members of the human family, to make manifest God's love for one other.