

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 7, 2021 – EPIPHANY 5B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*The Awesome Healing Power of God*”

Isaiah 40:21-31 (The Lord gives strength to the powerless, and renewal to all who are weary)
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c (Praise the Lord who heals the brokenhearted and binds up the wounded)
1 Corinthians 9:16-23 (St. Paul tries to preach the Gospel by empathizing and identifying with people)
St. Mark 1:29-39 (Jesus heals and exorcises many who suffer)

Throughout my life, I've been interested in healing and medical issues. As a child, I wanted to be a nurse or a doctor. Eagerly, I read biographies of Florence Nightingale, the famous 19th-century nurse; Clara Barton, the nurse who founded the Red Cross; and Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman physician. I was “glued” to Dr. Kildare on TV. And, over the years, I asked my parents for, and received, a nurse’s outfit; a toy doctor’s bag; a chemistry set; and the Visible Woman kit. Anyone remember her? She was clear plastic and you could see all her organs in pink and purple, with spider webs of blue and red veins and arteries running throughout her limbs.

Unfortunately, my medical ambitions were quickly dashed when I reached high school. In biology class, I felt faint at the sight of blood, and nearly threw up when it came to dissecting frogs. Moreover, I was so bad at math, I couldn’t have survived most of the required science courses. So I started thinking about being a different kind of doctor, a psychologist. Well, needless to say, my inability to pass statistics—even though I took it twice—tanked that career idea, too.

Nonetheless, I continued to read about health topics, and became interested in herbalism, nutritional and vitamin therapy, homeopathy, and holistic healing. But it wasn't until I came to know Christ and developed a personal relationship with Our Lord that I began to take seriously the reality of God healing people, especially through laying-on of hands, anointing, and prayer.

The Gospel of Mark, most likely the earliest account of Jesus’ life and ministry, makes special note of the crowds of people coming to Him for healing. They were so persistent, often it was impossible for Jesus and His disciples even to eat a meal in peace. Sometimes Jesus had to cross the sea of Galilee or even go into Gentile territory just to escape the multitudes who gave Him no rest in their quest for healing.¹

Our Lord took healing so seriously that, in the Gospels, not only does He Himself heal people, but also, He instructs His disciples to go out and minister healing to those in need. The early Christian Church had a profound faith in the Risen Lord’s ability to continue healing in response to their prayers. Jesus’ brother James writes in his book, chapter 5, verses 13 through 16: “Are any among you suffering? They should pray. ... Are any among you sick? They should call the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” St. James links confessing our spiritual sin and receiving forgiveness to the healing of our physical bodies. It would seem that centuries before science discovered the strong connection between mind and body, Jesus understood the complexity of what causes our pains and illnesses. In more than one instance, Christ forgave a person’s sins—or in today’s story, cast out their demons—in conjunction with healing them physically. Does this mean that sin or evil is the *cause* of sickness? Well, it may or may not be.

The reality is, because we are human, we are vulnerable to the power of sin in all its dimensions, including physical illness. The moral lapses and bodily disease from which Christ freed people, St. Mark sees, at least indirectly, as the effect of sin—not necessarily personal sin, but the fallen human condition which affects us all. In Acts 10:38, St. Peter, in summarizing the ministry of Jesus, declares: “Because God was with him, Jesus went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil.”

And in Luke 7:21 we read: “Jesus ... cured many people of diseases, plagues, evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind.”

The late Fr. Francis MacNutt, a well-known author on healing prayer, writes: “Original sin is, I ... find, a very real thing—not merely an abstraction. It is a real evil in human beings ... We are all wounded; our wills don’t always have the power to change, our minds are confused, our emotions can enslave us, and we are strangely moved by unreasoning impulses. ... There is a limit to the power of human beings to achieve their own perfection. [Yet] over and over again I have seen that there is a power, the saving, healing power of Jesus Christ, which can change and transform lives in ways that I never would have dreamed of in my previous pastoral experience.”²

Jesus Christ, who is God-in-person, has the power to save us both from personal sin and from the sickness of the human condition, which includes evil deeds, disordered minds, unbalanced emotions, physical illness, and death. Francis MacNutt observes, “Healing is simply the practical application of the basic Christian message of salvation, a belief that Jesus means to liberate us from personal sin and from emotional and physical sickness.”³ Do you truly believe that?

A couple of years ago, I received an alumni email from Trinity School for Ministry, praising God that a woman who had suffered violent headaches for years attended a healing prayer service at the school, and after being prayed for, has had no more pain at all. That same email contained a story about the infant child of two alumni, who was healed of spinal meningitis through laying-on-of-hands and prayer.

Even so, many Christians don’t believe in the healing power of God through prayer. They still suffer the after-effects of the Enlightenment, holding a greater faith in science than in God, and suspicious of anything that cannot be proven or explained. This attitude was quite prevalent in the 1950’s and ‘60’s. But fortunately, even top scientists now acknowledge there is much in our world they can neither explain nor prove. Healing in response to prayer seems to fall into this category, and is increasingly accepted by the medical profession—and even by non-Christians.

So what is healing? And if God still heals people, why doesn’t He heal everyone? What are the criteria for healing? If people aren’t healed after prayer, is it their fault because they don’t have enough faith?

It’s common knowledge that our minds can strongly influence our bodies. For example, persons who are emotionally depressed also exhibit overt physical symptoms. And biofeedback experiments have shown that people are able to lower their temperature or their blood pressure just through the power of intentional thought. At the first church I served, there was a widow who wanted so much to die, even though she was not ill, she simply lay down on her sofa and expired!

When we pray for healing, it is God’s love that kick-starts our body’s own healing mechanism so that the recuperative process can begin. But at times, there may be hindrances to healing if something is blocking God’s love. For instance, if a person harbors a deeply hidden bitterness and unforgiveness, arrogance, or jealousy, their channel for God’s love may be obstructed. Deep emotional anguish, unless it is recognized and dealt with, may itself fester and lead to illness. That could be why Jesus often prefaced His healings with the words, “Your sins are forgiven.” But He did not always say that. And it’s clear that many illnesses, such as the fever that Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is said to have in today’s Gospel, are caused by external factors such as bacteria and viruses.

I don’t believe God picks and chooses those whom He will heal. As Fr. Nigel Mumford, who has a powerful healing ministry, says: “Whenever we pray, God always does something!” I do believe God always answers our prayers for healing. It’s just that our idea of healing may not always be God’s. For instance, if someone had an arm amputated, not even the power of prayer could produce another arm. Yet God is able nevertheless to minister *wholeness* to that person in profound and wonderful ways.

Jesus directed His disciples to channel God’s healing power through prayer. We, too, can do this in faith. During healing prayer, hands may be placed on the patient’s head, or on the part of the body that is affected. Many people report a sensation of warmth or tingling from the experience of the laying-on of hands, or a tangible sense of support and peace, or of something changing inside them.

Healers and intercessors act as a channel for God’s love and power. And anyone may be called by God to assist in Christ’s healing ministry, as we know some in this congregation were. Jesus of course, is the best channel; but even He would not heal in the presence of unbelief. In Mark 6:5-6 we’re told that because so few in His own hometown trusted Him, Jesus could only cure “a few sick people.”⁴

Perhaps there is a difference between curing and healing. The best and most complete healing is a restoration of our union with Christ that takes place within the deepest recesses of our being. It is a healing of our inner self, spirit and soul, which may or may not radiate through to healing of the physical body. What God wants for us is *wholeness*, and sometimes that may even require that we go to be with Him in death, as hard as that is for us to accept.

If we are to be followers of, and imitators of, Jesus Christ, we must trust in His healing power, and help bring that to others in whatever way we can—whether through prayer; forgiving and releasing the other person from what we think they owe us; or simply calling, visiting, holding a person’s hand, listening, sending a card, taking them to the doctor, or picking up their prescription.

My prayer for each of us is that we will experience the wholeness and healing Jesus wants for us. And may God grant us the grace and courage to carry this good news out into our sick and dying world, so that others may be blessed. *Amen.*

¹ Francis MacNutt, The Power to Heal (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1977), p. 17.

² MacNutt, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

³ MacNutt, Healing (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1974), p. 50.

⁴ Adapt. Commentary on Mark 1:29-39 for Epiphany 5B, < <http://www.sermons-stories.co.uk/mk5lent.htm> > 2003.