

“Spiritual Healing” (Part 2)

The *Interpreter* is one of the magazines published by the United Methodist Church. One of its issues featured an article on healing. It said, in part, "In an era when researchers are rapidly discovering more effective cures for many ailments, a growing number of pastors, doctors and spiritual leaders are rediscovering that the best medicines cure the soul as well as the body...an increasing number of United Methodists of all backgrounds are embracing the notion of Christian faith and prayer as critical to physical healing. They are doing everything from forming prayer groups to conducting healing rituals during worship services."

Last week I pointed out how healing was a vital part of the ministry of Jesus and the early church, and that the church today has a role to play in the healing of persons. I defined “spiritual healing” as the application of spiritual principles, such as faith, prayer, love, etc., to the healing of the total person – body, mind and spirit. I also said that being whole includes being in a right relationship with God. I want to talk more today about healing.

Let's begin by asking: Does God send sickness? Is it God's will that we be sick? I've heard people suggest that maybe God made them sick to punish them. Now there are a number of Old Testament passages that say God sends sickness as a punishment! See, for example, Leviticus 26:15-16, Deuteronomy 28:61, and Micah 6:13. There are others also.

But Jesus taught that sickness comes from Satan, not God! God wants us to be whole. In Matthew 12:22-28 there is a story of Jesus healing a man who is blind and mute. The Pharisees criticize Jesus, and say He's casting out demons by the power of the devil. Jesus responds by saying if He's healing by the power of Satan, then Satan is opposing himself. “If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?” (Matthew 12:26). Can we see Jesus' point? *Sickness is part of Satan's kingdom and work* – and if through Jesus *Satan* is curing people, he is working against himself! In Luke 13 Jesus heals a woman stooped over for 18 years! The Pharisees (again) complain, because Jesus healed her on the Sabbath. Jesus responds: “Ought not this woman ...*whom Satan bound* for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage...?” (Luke 13:16). Note: “whom Satan bound”.

According to Jesus, Satan makes people sick, not God! Jesus attacked illness as part of the kingdom of evil, the demonic powers that destroy the goodness of life. James McFarland comments on this: “As we read the miracles of Jesus we find the story of one who is confident of His life's work, who attacks sin, disease and death in no uncertain way...Jesus never seems to have hesitated in treating disease as something alien to the Kingdom of Heaven, and to have struck at it wherever He found faith to be healed. In fact, there is not a single instance recorded in which He refused the appeal of a sick (person) on the grounds that it was God's will that (the person) continue to suffer. He never implied that illness was good for anyone. Jesus always considered disease an enemy, an enemy to be conquered, and in conquering it He is carrying out His Father's will.”

I believe the Bible teaches that God wills us to be whole. If you think about it, if God wants people to be sick, then physicians, nurses, medical personnel and medical researchers - all who work diligently to cure illness - are actually working against God! But I see them working

alongside of God in His desire to heal people!

Sickness is a part of the realm of evil, and when God's kingdom fully comes there will be no more sickness. Sickness, decay, disease, death will be vanquished. That's why, when Jesus came and announced that God's kingdom was breaking in on the world, one of the signs of this was that *He healed people!* His healings were a preview of what it will be like in God's kingdom, where there is no illness.

But if God wills us to be whole, of course there is a question that's hard to avoid: ***Why aren't some sick people healed when we pray for their healing?*** *No one has a complete answer to that question.* There's a mystery here – why some are healed, others are not. But I think we can say some things that might shed some light on this important issue.

First, we live in the tension between two worlds and two ages. There is the *present world*. It was created good, but sin entered the picture. So the present world is a fallen world, marked by evil, and decay, and sickness, and death. But there is also the *new age*, the *kingdom of God*, where there is no evil, no sickness, no death. With the coming of Jesus God's kingdom has *!' these two worlds*. There are times when the powers of the kingdom are evident. Someone comes to new life in Christ. Someone is set free from a sin or a bad habit. The church prays and someone is healed. All these are signs of the kingdom! But we still live with our feet planted in a fallen world. People sin. People get sick. People die. The powers of the kingdom are available to us through faith in Christ, but we still have to contend with our humanity and the brokenness that we experience in this earthly life.

Let's shift gears here and talk about ***faith, and the part faith may play in determining whether or not healing takes place.*** In some healing stories in the Bible, faith is an important element. For instance, in Matthew 9:29, Jesus says to two blind men who sought healing, "According to your faith, let it be done to you." They were healed. But look at this Scripture: "He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief" (Mark 6:1-6). Notice how the unbelief of Jesus' hometown folk hindered His ability to do miracles and heal.

Yet, faith is not mentioned at all in some of the healing stories! And it doesn't seem to be always necessary that the sick person show faith! For instance, a royal official's son is healed by Jesus, and there is no evidence that the son had faith. A sick person may be in a coma, and can't exercise faith. A tiny infant who is ill doesn't have the developmental capacity for faith. Some have said it's an *"atmosphere of faith"* that is important. *Healing can take place where*

there is little faith, or even no faith, but I believe it is more likely that healing will take place where there is faith in God's power to heal!

Faith is only *one* factor determining whether a person is healed or not. One of the worst things that can happen...and one of the pitfalls of a healing emphasis...is that when someone is not healed, those who have prayed will blame themselves, and feel guilty, and say, "We didn't have enough faith." To add guilt onto sorrow only complicates the situation and makes it worse.

Faith isn't the only factor involved in whether healing comes or not. Dr. Alfred Price is a Christian who pioneered in the modern healing movement in the church. He says, "A person may have a real, live faith and still be subject to serious illness. No disease attacks the body without a cause...and the work of medical science as well as spiritual therapy is to find the cause and then apply the remedy...God can never for a moment will the continuance of the disease, or not will the recovery of the sick person. If sickness continues, or is not healed, it is because something – either in the person, or in his environment, or in the world in which he lives is hindering or thwarting God's purpose of wholeness."

God wills our wholeness, but there are many things that can block God's healing. And with our limited human knowledge and perspective, we may just have to admit that we can't understand it all.

If a person is not healed physically, is this a sign of failure? Does this mean that healing has not taken place? No. Not at all. We are seeking *wholeness of body, mind and spirit* – not just that our bodies get repaired. For example, a person may be impaired physically – a person can be blind, or have diabetes, or be limited because of a stroke – and still be a "whole" person. Where a person can accept a chronic illness, or disability, without self-pity; and have a healthy relationship with God and others, this person can be very "whole"!

Even if the person we pray for dies, this does not necessarily mean defeat. When the sick person is right with God, has accepted the illness with serenity and without bitterness, that person's death does not mean defeat, but rather the *final* healing and victory that comes in the kingdom of heaven.

In one of the churches I served there was a lovely Puerto Rican woman, a mother of 3 children, with a great faith in the Lord. Carmen had developed cancer prior to my coming to the church, and during the next 7 years or so she battled this disease. There were periods when the disease was under control, but there were difficult periods when she was receiving chemotherapy, with all its ugly side effects. During those years I had many opportunities to talk with Carmen about her faith in Jesus. She believed in Him and His power to heal. She came to our healing services. She also got involved in a Pentecostal group and they prayed for her healing too. During that whole time she maintained a positive attitude. She refused to become bitter, or mad at God.

There were many victories, but she eventually died – although she lived much longer than expected. The church was packed at her funeral service. Many people shared stories about

Carmen and how she had touched their lives with her faith and her love for Jesus. Her husband and 3 children spoke at the service and paid tribute to this beautiful lady of faith. We can say Carmen was not healed. But she was a spiritually whole, radiant person in Christ! And she experienced the ultimate healing – life free of disease in the kingdom of God!

All of us are going to die someday. No amount of faith or prayer is going to keep our body from wearing out. But if we have faith in Christ, the end of our life on earth is just the start of the full healing that comes in the kingdom of God!

Another question: Must healing be sudden, or instantaneous, to be miraculous? Certainly not! Jesus once healed a blind man. But he wasn't healed entirely. He said to Jesus, "I can see people, but they look like trees walking!" (Mark 8:24). He had distorted vision. So Jesus touched him again, and he could see plainly. Someone has remarked, "In the vast majority of cases the physical body is so weak or has suffered so long that healing takes place within the God-given laws of progress." A healing that takes days or weeks is no less valid than one that happens instantly.

Can we help God in the healing process? Of course! First of all, we have to really *want* to be healed! I came across a cartoon. A pastor is sick in the hospital. Several church leaders are visiting him, by his bedside. One says, "We've got good news, reverend. Our Church Board voted last night by a vote of 6 to 5 to pray for your recovery!" Well, psychologists tell us there are many unconscious reasons why one might prefer to be sick rather than well! Having a desire for healing to happen counts for much!

Also, it's important to cooperate with the laws of good health! I remember a man in my home church who had gall bladder problems. A group in the church prayed for him and he was healed. But he was also careful to follow his doctor's orders. He watched his diet. And this man of faith said, "Why should I tempt God? If I pray for healing, then I have to do my part." If we pray for healing, then don't listen to the doctor, we probably deserve to be sick!

There is so much more that could be said about spiritual healing. But maybe some of us are skeptical about having a healing service. "I'm just not sure about this..." you might be saying, or "What if I pray, and the person is not healed?" So we may come with a negative, doubting mindset. To me, the saddest thing is not that we venture into a healing ministry, and some do not get healed physically, but that many *could be healed*, if we only sought it and claimed God's promises!

God is still in the healing business! God is still our healer. Exodus 15:26 says, "I am the Lord who heals you."

In that *Interpreter* magazine article on healing that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon it tells of a seminary student named Hilda Davis. She suffered back pain to the point where she couldn't jog anymore. She became desperate and depressed by the physical limitations imposed by the pain. One night she went to a prayer and healing service at a nearby church. As she went

to the altar for prayer, she remembers the pastor and five others laying hands on her shoulders and back, while they engaged in earnest prayer. As the pastor prayed and the others touched her, she felt a warmth in her back. The pain lessened and finally subsided. She knew she had been healed. She says, "Most people hear about faith healing and are skeptical. So was I until that service." *God still heals!*

I started healing services in the last church I served. Right before we initiated this ministry, the young man on our staff doing youth ministry and worship leading told me of a problem he was having with his jaw. Movement was limited. I prayed and anointed him with oil. The problem went away! And at our first healing service he gave his testimony of healing! *God still heals!*

In the church I served prior to that one Sunday morning a man who had been a member of that church some years before was there as a visitor. This individual had also been a member of a previous church that I served. We had a healing service that morning. After the service, this man came up to me. He told me how he had come to the altar for healing. He was anointed with oil, and he found healing. He had never before said anything to me about it, and it was only now, some years later, that I learned God had touched him and healed him. *God still heals! And when He does, it is good that we share this to encourage others!*

Let me finish these two messages by reading 2 verses of Scripture that are awesome! "That evening they brought to (Jesus) many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases'" (Matthew 8:16-17). This Scripture says that Jesus healed *all* who came to Him! And this was a fulfillment of prophecy from Isaiah: Jesus suffered on the cross not just to forgive our sins, but to *heal our diseases!*

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