

DIVINE HEALING GRACES

James 5:13-20

Barbara was 31 and a mother of three children. And she was staring at possible thyroid cancer. As she awaited the results of the tests, she revisited what she knew of her faith and found that she had more than a little faith in God. Given her familiarity with the Gospels, it is not surprising that Barbara found an example for her personal healing in a Bible passage. One Sunday, as she was praying in church, the gospel story of the woman with a hemorrhage kept coming into her mind... [The woman] wanted to be healed but she didn't want to bother Jesus, so she approached him in a crowd and touched his robe, Barbara explained. Of course, Jesus knew what happened and praised the woman for her faith. I wanted to be like that woman. As Barbara prepared to go up to the altar for Communion, she suddenly thought, I could be like her. An Episcopalian, Barbara viewed the priest who was presiding at the Holy Eucharist as a stand-in' for Jesus during the service. She decided she would touch the priest's robe when he gave her the Communion wafer. I touched his robe, and he couldn't have known that I did, though he did know about my cancer, she remembered. He did something in that moment that I had never seen him do before: He put down the paten with the Communion wafers and came over to me; laying both hands on my head, he prayed for my healing. After receiving the Communion wine, Barbara stood up at the altar. I was so overwhelmed with God's love that I knew I was healed, she said. My healing wasn't physical at that point, but my heart was healed. I wasn't anxious or afraid or doubtful or sad at all. I had complete trust in God and his love, something he knew I needed far more than any other kind of healing at that moment. A few weeks after her healing at the altar rail, Barbara's surgery revealed that the lump on her neck was indeed thyroid cancer. She went through treatments then, and six months later for a recurrence. Somehow the medical treatments, too, seemed to be directly from God: I felt that God had simply completed a healing he had started at the altar at church. Today, Barbara is healthy and leads a full and prayerful life.

Are any of you sick? Our Scripture this morning from James invites us to consider healing and prayer for healing – and to take this matter seriously in the life of the church. Because of our human nature, we are a wounded people. We are born into this world with enormous potential. I know you have heard all throughout your lives that God has a plan. Well, I tend to have an almost simplistic understanding of God's plan for any and all lives. I believe God desires nothing but the best for each person, each child, even our beloved pets. But, because of original sin, our bodies have become vulnerable to illness. Our spirits have become vulnerable to discouragement and all sorts of unhealthy and negative feelings. Because of original sin, we are a broken people. There was a time in my faith journey that I really struggled with the theological understanding that we are all born into sin. I knew the story of the “fall” of humankind in the Garden of Eden and I used to say somewhat with tongue in cheek, “Hey, I wasn't there. I did not take a bite from the apple (or whatever the fruit of the tree of knowledge actually was) so why am I made to suffer?”

After years of study and reflection, I have a different view and understanding of Original Sin. God created us with a free will, which I would not want to change for all the tea in China, but with this

free will comes enormous responsibility. Have you always chosen the best for your life? Even the smallest child will stamp his or her little foot and insist on their own way, in direct opposition to the plans their parents might have for them. So too it is this way with us and God. Bottom line...each one of us here this morning, no matter our age, does something every single day of our lives directly opposing God's plan for our lives. Hence, if it had not been the first man and woman who chose to disobey God in that luscious, worry and pain free Garden, someone would have come along and decided they knew better than God what was good for their life. You and I do it every day.

The direct result of this is that the once perfect bodies, hearts, minds and souls of God's original creation are now flawed. Over time our bodies wear out, we become prone to disease, and eventually we all die to this life. Some of us become ill because of choices we make in life, yet we know so many more become sick where there is no rhyme or reason. We all know people who have never smoked a cigarette in their life who get lung cancer – Dana Reeve, wife of Superman, is only one example of this.

There was a time that any defect or disease of the body, mind or spirit was believed to be a direct result of something we had done wrong in our life. The story of the man born blind in John 9, demonstrates this flawed theology, "*Rabbi, his disciples asked him, 'why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents' sins?'*" Jesus responded to this line of thinking by saying, neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that the Glory of God might be shown through him.

Christians frequently think that if we pray enough, God will remove all trials from our lives. A family with a drug-addicted teenager might be pressured to “pray harder and the kid will come around,” rather than for the strength to care for their child and to find the right treatment and support. Parents whose asthmatic child has life-threatening allergies are convinced that if they pray before the child eats certain foods; the child won't have an allergic reaction. An emergency trip to the hospital has not convinced them that perhaps God is trying to tell them something else. Somehow these devout Christians have grasped the Jesus of the miracles but have ignored the word of the cross. Prayer is important in healing, but prayer is an opening up of ourselves to what God wills, not an exercise in forcing God to do our will. Healing prayer and services, however, must be approached with the understanding that it is God through the Holy Spirit that does the healing, and like the woman in our opening story, our healing is not always of the physical kind. Quite often, it is our souls that need healing. Some have been mortally wounded by a relationship gone bad. Others have suffered abuse – physically, mentally and or emotionally. Memories need to be healed. Healing is not only for obvious illnesses, as demonstrated in the following illustration:

Barbara was a young lady in her 20s who had returned to school to finish her education Once a pastor gave a devotional from a lament psalm about dealing with grief. She hung around after class and said she wanted to talk, so the pastor set up an appointment for later that afternoon. She had not been in his office five minutes before she began to weep. One of the first things she said was, “I hate God.” In the pastor's own words, “I had heard it before from others, so it didn't shock me. I simply

asked her if she wanted to talk about it. She poured out a story of grief and pain that I could not have imagined. Among other things, she had been sexually abused for years as a child. To get out of a horrible home situation, she had married at 16. Her first child had died as an infant two years later. Not long after that her husband, who had beat her regularly, simply walked out one day. At 20 she had known more hurt than most of us will ever know in a lifetime. Did she really hate God? I don't know. I don't think so. But I don't really think it mattered. Hate is an emotion, and she was full of emotion. She felt as if God had forsaken her. As we talked it became clear that she did not know what to do with her anger, grief and hurt. She thought that to be a Christian meant that she was not supposed to have the feelings she had. She thought that serving God meant that she should somehow just be happy because she was a Christian. But she was not happy. She hurt too deeply. We sat and read Psalm 22 together. Barbara's healing did not come at once. Over the next months there were many talks, many prayers, many tears. There were other friends, and a caring pastor, to help. Still, Barbara needed professional counseling to help her deal with her past. But healing came.

There is another element of healing prayer that needs to be clear – while faith is important, the amount of faith you bring to this service has little or no bearing on the outcome of healing prayer. When I was a brand-new Christian, I was part of a prayer group that laid hands and prayed over me for healing of my ears. When the prayers were over and I still could not hear, I put my hearing aid back on. I was severely chastised by some of the people in our group. I was told two very damaging things, “If you had more faith (e.g. by not putting the hearing aid back in) God would heal you.” If that wasn't bad enough, I was also told, “There must be some sin in your life that you need to confess that is preventing your healing.” Horse hockey! Sometimes healing comes in the form of eternal healing when a loved one goes home to be with Jesus. This is not hocus pocus or magic.

I believe most here are mature enough to understand the Lord indeed works in mysterious ways. We often cannot know or understand the *hows* or the *whys* of things that happen in our lives. But there are some certainties. We know that our God is a source of wholeness. We also know that, according to today's reading from the letter of James in the New Testament, those who are sick are invited to call for the “elders” of the church for prayer, the laying on of hands and anointing. And the “prayer of faith will save the sick,” we are told. In a few moments you will all have the opportunity to come to the altar for anointing and prayer. I have absolutely no expectations of what people will do. You must listen to the movement of the Holy Spirit upon you if you come forward. This is an opportunity for any who feel sick in body or in soul to take steps toward healing – then to leave the healing in God's hands. Sometimes responding to seeking out God for healing comes out of obedience.

In August 2001, my best friend, the Reverend Pamela Sawyer was put into a medically induced coma after complications developed from a routine surgical procedure. Over the next 5 weeks, Pam received pint after pint of blood in an attempt to replace the blood she had lost. Sadly, she had developed a condition where her blood would not clot and the longer she remained in a coma, the less likely she was to recover. At the end of the fifth week, her Parish Nurse and friend Lynn asked me to do a healing service for Pam. At first, I refused because I did not think I had the gift of healing and my own understanding of healing prayer was not fully formed. I did not feel qualified as I had

never led a healing service, but Lynn persisted and insisted and that is how I found myself leading a service of healing around Pam's hospital bed in the CCU of Reston Hospital. I was acting out of my love for Pam, and out of obedience to the words of James 5. After anointing and praying for Pam, I invited others to also be anointed and together we also shared Holy Communion. As I wrote in my paper for ordination, this was the last living act of the church Pam received. Less than a week later, Pam was eternally healed when she claimed the promise of the Resurrection.

This morning, I invite and offer this time for healing prayer. If you do not feel led to come forward you can consider this service to be sort of a "wellness" checkup. While people come forward, use this time for prayer and contemplation. Ask God to place his hand over your heart to ensure that it is healthy and responsive and to bring to your attention areas in your life where you might be spiritually ailing.

We are here this morning to worship the risen Lord, who, at the beginning of his ministry, quoted the prophet Isaiah, as a reference to himself: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted" (Isaiah 61:1). Jesus also sent out the disciples two by two instructing them "*If you enter a town and it welcomes you, eat whatever is set before you. Heal the sick, and tell them, 'The Kingdom of God is near you now.'*"

I believe coming forward for healing prayer is an act of obedience to the Holy Spirit. I have no idea how God will answer our prayers this morning. The important thing to keep in mind is God is always at work within you, and that the "***One who began a good work within you will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ.***"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.