

*“The prayer of faith will save the sick.”*

When we pray for healing for what exactly are we praying? Certainly this is a question that must come to most if not all Christians at some point in their lives. We can well imagine that this is a question that has captured the minds of Christians from the very beginning.

In our reading from James this morning healing is addressed. The Letter of James is one of the oddest ducks in our New Testament. The book does not resemble a letter – like Paul’s letters. James is actually thought to be a sermon or series of sermons preached by James, the brother of Jesus. The sermons were then revised several decades later and presented as a letter. As we have been hearing for the past several weeks the book of James is concerned with faith, faith lived out. If there is a punch line for this book it might be, “Faith – like love – is not a feeling but an action.” And at the close of this “letter” comes the passage we heard this morning about prayer and healing as acts of faith. I wonder if there has been a verse of scripture that has caused as much consternation as the verse I quoted at the outset: “The prayer of faith will save the sick (sometimes translated as “heal the sick”).”

At times I will get up early on a Sunday morning. In case you did not know this, dwelling in the more remote regions of cable TV at 3 or 4 AM on Sunday mornings is an interesting array of televangelists who seem to be quite concerned with healing folks. When I could not be here two weeks ago my early morning companion was Reverend Ike. When I tuned in he was holding a cloth that he had prayed over and anointed, and was at that moment anointing with the sweat of his brow. On the prayer cloth – hand embroidered – read these same words: “the prayer of faith will save the sick.” The promise from Reverend Ike is that this prayer cloth will heal you of ANY physical ailment and give you prosperity. I had to ask myself is this what James – or Jesus for that matter – has in mind when it comes to our prayers for healing? Is Rev Ike’s promise Jesus’ promise about healing?

Jesus came and healed wherever he went. Healing was a part of the Jesus experience. It just happened. But those he healed still died. No life on this earth is meant to be spent in endless good physical health. This is not our promise through JC. Jesus promises something altogether different, something beyond.

Before I go further I would like to be clear about one thing: I certainly am a strong advocate for the healing of the body through prayer. I have seen it happen on a number of occasions. And I have witnessed the human body’s recovery from disease processes that had no right to recover, cancers disappearing, failing hearts strengthening, when by all medical reason and logic the cancer should be more widespread, the heart weaker. We do and should pray for the recovery of our health and for that of others.

But what of the times where we have prayed for the recovery of full health for ourselves or someone we love, only to see disease continue to progress, and a body fail? What of healing? Imagine that I pray for full restoration of health every time I become ill during the course of my life. Will I not reach a point where my body will continue to deteriorate, in spite of my prayers? What of healing? What of my prayer of faith?

When we believe that our prayers of faith have restoration of physical health as their only goal, we fall into error. When Jennifer and I lived in Boston there was a notorious legal case there that involved the death of a child whose parents belonged to a Christian church who only allowed for healing through prayers of faith. For them, to engage modern medicine was an act of disbelief in the power of God. “The prayer of faith will save the sick” was their mantra. According to the church leaders, the child died because the parents did not have enough faith. If

this then was indeed the case all humans would perish from this earthly life in a state of faithlessness. We know that this is just not true.

What do we mean by healing? Perhaps a better question at this point might be, “Why do we desire healing?” What is the purpose of prayers for healing if it is not to restore us to perpetual youth and health? Certainly our bodies have a purpose and meaning in our earthly lives. Their capacity to fulfill that purpose is limited, and time-dependent. Is not the purpose of our bodies to engage/convey/articulate the purposes of our lives? The body stands in service of the purposes of our lives. Do prayers for healing have something to do with this second part, the purposes of our lives?

For an answer perhaps we might consider the young girl visiting her grandmother in the hospital. The girl sits beside her grandmother, praying while her grandmother dozes. Suppose we ask the girl, “What are you praying for?” She might say, “That my mamaw gets well. That her cancer goes away.” “Ah, that is a good prayer,” we might say. “But won’t your mamaw get sick with something else later?” “Yeah,” the young girl might sigh. The prayer for restoring health for the sake of health might seem futile. We might then ask, “Well, why do you want her better?” The young girl might look down at her sleeping grandmother and say, “Because I love her. Because I want to be able to bake pies with her again. Because I like the way she reads to me. Because she is teaching me how to garden. I love her.” Now we are getting somewhere. As vital as physical health is the prayer of healing has something much deeper and fuller as its endpoint.

When the evangelists describe the healing stories of Jesus in their gospels, they are painfully careful about word choice. I have mentioned this before, but it is worth revisiting. In the Greek language there are four different words that our English can only translate as “heal” or “be made well.” Each of these Greek words means something very different from the others. When the Gospel writers describe the healings of Jesus invariably they use these different words to convey a process of healing. Typically Jesus encounters a person with a disease, a demon, or a condition that places the individual on the margins of Jewish society. The afflicted person is usually a leper, a Samaritan, a woman, a Gentile. [Or if they are not, the encounter with the individual and Jesus is on a Sabbath, which was a point of contention for Jesus and the Pharisees. The healings on the Sabbath were to demonstrate that the Sabbath is meant not for idle rest but for wholeness and completion] At any rate the sequence of healing proceeds in this way: Jesus encounters a sick or disabled person suffering with a marginalizing condition. Jesus cures the individual’s physical malady (the Greek word for healing of the body is used). The person finds that in the healing their marginalized status is healed as well (a different Greek word for healing of body, mind, and spirit is used). The individual then demonstrates a sign of faith and gratitude. Jesus says something along the lines of “Go in peace. Your faith has made you well” (yet another Greek word [sozo] is used that means healing of one’s eternal relationship with God). In the healing stories of the gospel the vast majority follow this pattern: healing of the individual leads to healing of relationship with others leads to healing of relationship with God. Jesus healed the body with these larger relationships in mind. It would be easy enough just to be satisfied with healing the body. That certainly was a show stopper. But Jesus always had that last word for healing, sozo, as the endpoint. He healed the body so that relationships, with others and especially with God, might be restored.

Going back to that little line from James’ letter, “The prayer of faith will save/heal the sick,” guess what Greek word is used for “save/heal”? Yep, sozo. The prayer of faith is the prayer that seeks as its endpoint right relationship with God and with others. That is why James goes on to say, “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.”

When we pray for healing of the body as an end in itself we ignore most of what Jesus came to heal. We ignore the fact that the practice of medicine – when done well – is much more relational than it is surgical or pharmaceutical. We ignore the truth that to the extent one loves and is loved, one is healed. We ignore the purpose of our bodies, which is to engage and convey the primary purpose of our lives, which is to love.

Too often we want healing to be the work of some strange alchemy. But the truth of the matter is that the gold is already here.