

God's Great Willingness Is For Healing

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If you were asked in a poll what should be this country's highest political priorities, what would they be? Health Reform has to be very high on that list. But most of the debate and study has to do with **quantities**—who's covered, how much money can we spend, how many tests do people need, how do we measure outcomes?

The Gospel today tells us of two healings by Jesus and takes us to another dimension and perspective on health reform—the **quality** of health care. One of the major battles of everyday life for everyone is the battle against disease. Whether it is for ourselves or for our loved ones, we need to be prepared for that engagement. The question that challenges us when we read the Gospel this morning is, what part does your religious faith play in healing?

There are two extreme views. According to the first view, religious faith plays the whole part in the battle against disease. The exponents of that view are Christian Scientists and others who believe that God is good, and disease is evil; therefore God cannot and did not make disease and disease has no part in His universe, and so—it doesn't exist. All we have to do is to correct our thinking and purify our beliefs. Doctors don't really have a place at all, for disease is by its nature an invisible, spiritual thing and can be fought only with spiritual weapons.

Few people would take the "power of positive thinking" to that extreme. But then the other extreme are those who believe, deep down in their hearts, that religion really plays no part in the battle against disease. My guess is that many, if not most Christians actually hold that point of view. They may be driven to pray when they are sick, and I have known exceptional examples of Christians who have found great spiritual reserves in times of illness.

But in the general pattern of life, we think of the doctor and the minister working, practically speaking, independently of each other. They may respect and appreciate the other, but actually don't really think that their purposes overlap with each other.

An actual story in my ministry comes to mind. My first congregation was in Lee's Summit, Missouri, the home of the Unity School of Christianity, a mind-science spinoff of Christian Science and the publisher of the popular magazine, "Daily Word". Two Episcopalian ladies, professors at a southern university, had come to a summer course at the Unity School. They came also to our early service because it was quiet, bringing their own prayer books that they had marked up with spiritual affirmations to replace the old Prayer Book words. In those days I would make afternoon calls on people often unannounced, especially newcomers. So in one of those visits I happened to find one of the ladies in great pain, soaking her foot in Epsom salts, and exclaiming, "Sometimes those damn affirmations just don't work!"

What a teaching moment for a third point of view—right from the New Testament—a view of the battle against disease never expressed in a theoretical way because Jesus was not a theorizing person. His way was expressed in action, an example that we read in the dramatic passage this morning, just one among so many of healing in action.

Let me recall four facts describing the actions of Jesus and then you decide what his point of view was about healing. First is the indisputable fact in the bible is that Jesus made sick people well. "And when the sun was setting, all they that had any sick brought them unto him; and he laid his hands on every one of them, and healed them." Second, he often made people physically well before he made them "good."—which may be shocking to us who are so keen on justice. We read, "wherever he entered, they laid the sick in the streets, and as many of them touched him were made whole." Third, when he gave his credentials to those who came from John the Baptist, asking whether or not he was the Messiah, his answer gave priority to the power of healing "the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear." And finally when he sent out his disciples, he sent them out to do the selfsame thing: "he sent them out to preach the Kingdom of God, *and to heal the sick.*"

Well, If you really believe what you read in the New Testament, it is difficult to get around this testimony. He could and did make sick people well. He didn't philosophize about the nature of reality that humans are all of a piece, not a collection of separate parts—body, mind, and spirit—we are, if you will, a trinity in unity. And he didn't say that disease is unreal, or that it is always curable. *He did not cure everyone.* He accepted disease as a fact even as he brought to bear in the battle against the enemy, disease, all the spiritual energy that he could muster from the hand of Almighty God.

So fortified with that bible testimony I had a made-to-order teaching moment with the woman soaking her foot in Epsom salts to observe that *God's priority, God's first will, is for health.* God can work through Epsom salts, through the miracles of modern pharmacology and technology, through the focused attention of a discerning and caring

doctor, as well as through fervent prayer. I still remember talking about that with that woman.

What I don't remember talking about then, but now as I read today's passage is so much on my mind, is the need to **really** trust the God who wills health. What a marvelous testimony to that trust there is in the woman who has suffered hemorrhages for twelve years and who trusted that with Jesus she could just come up out of the crowd, interrupt his journey by touching him, and find healing through that courage. What marvelous testimony was there in Jairus, a leading citizen who would risk his reputation in the community to ask Jesus to heal his daughter! and be persistent enough to stay with Jesus even through the interruption by the suffering woman.

In the Gospel this morning Jesus preached the shortest sermon of his career to Jairus the grieving father, "Do not fear, only believe." That sermon was not just to the father or for the early Church that Mark was addressing, but for all of us who suffer from the human condition that many times we are up against things we cannot control.

When we're in that spot and are willing to bet our life on faithfulness over fear, we may not find physical healing but can find something that we can change—a change of **attitude and trust** that shifts the direction of our mind and spirit as we edge into a deeper relationship in God for all the days to come. No matter what the physical condition turns out to be, that change of attitude and trust has restored an eternal meaning to life.

Frederick Buechner has written a beautiful sermon on today's Gospel that expresses that truth more poignantly. He puts us in the place of the little girl, with Jesus speaking to us, taking our hand and telling us to rise up and live:

You who believe, and you who sometimes believe and sometimes don't believe much of anything, and you who would give almost anything to believe if only you could... 'Get up' he says, all of you. Jesus gives life not only to the dead but to those who are only partly alive..with our lives closed to the beauty and miracle of every day we live and even of ourselves. That spirit, Buechner says, "is the power at the heart of this story and all our stories--"the power of new life, new hope, new being."

That, my friends, is at the very heart of the health and healing re-formation that we all need, now, every day. AMEN