

“Change the World: Heal the Sick”

Luke 9:1-2

There is a joke about a pastor who was visiting a patient in the hospital. The woman she was visiting was one of the saints of the church. She seemed to be at the end of her rope. She was 92 and having a hard time breathing and there seemed to be no healing in sight. As expected, the pastor asked if there was anything she could do to help. The woman responded by saying, “Please pray for my healing.” The pastor agreed and prayed fervently for healing, even though she felt that a prayer for the end of life would have been more appropriate. After the prayer ended, the woman in the hospital bed suddenly began breathing normally, started perking up, sat up with eyes wide open and said, “Hallelujah, I think I am healed.” The pastor was dumbfounded. She did not know what to say. She mumbled a few words and left the hospital as quickly as possible. As she was getting into her car, she looked and said to God, “Don’t you ever do that to me again!”

Today as we consider the call of Jesus to heal the sick in his way, it is daunting to think of what that means for each of us. We may feel comfortable thinking of this topic in general, but to take it seriously and in terms of our everyday life it might be easier to downplay this call. For one thing, physical healing does not always happen when we pray for people who are sick and so we often feel helpless. Some people may even project this kind of helplessness onto God with blame or disbelief because God seems to be the one responsible for not healing them. One of the most frequent pastoral questions is, “why did the miracle not happen to me or my loved one?” One of the worst things religious people do is blame the absence of a miracle on a lack of faith. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that “We tend to believe that miracles work along the same lines as those strength tests at the state fair, the ones with a big thermometer and red ringer at the top. It is all a matter of how hard we can hit the thing with a sledgehammer. If we are really strong, we can ring the bell and win the prize. In other words, miracles are something we control. Only this is idolatry, one more attempt to be in charge of our lives, instead of owning up to the truth that every single breath we take is a free surprise and miracle from God. To concentrate on the strength of our own belief is to practice magic. To concentrate on the strength of God is to practice faith.” Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 226.

I pray today that we can find a way to take this call seriously and to find some specific ways to heal the sick. Let’s listen to the commission of Jesus to the disciples in Luke 9 “When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.”

Jesus saw that part of the training of the disciples was to go out to the world and to practice releasing his healing energy into the world. Disease in the time of Jesus was not seen just as physical. Healers like Jesus saw disease as a larger social and spiritual issue. In the synoptic Gospels (the first three), there are 22 stories of healing. Fifteen of these stories tell about people who were marginalized such as women, lepers,

demoniacs, beggars, and those who were discriminated against by the religious leadership. Healing was much more involved because the causes of illness were also seen as complex.

There are three aspects to consider in the healings which Jesus brought to people.

1. Jesus recognized the vulnerability of the sick: Jesus saw the need for those who were sick to be touched and to be treated as full human beings, even though touching the sick was considered dangerous.
2. Jesus challenged the systems that excluded the sick: He brought them back to society. He knew that people were often stripped of their rights and of their social standing once their illness was seen as a threat to society.
3. Jesus affirmed the need for spiritual healing: Jesus saw the spiritual pain of people as burdens that kept them unable to heal. He offered forgiveness, cast out evil spirits, and affirmed the healing power of faith.

With these pieces in mind, we know that healing the sick is not just about the physical aspects of curing an illness. It is a much bigger endeavor which we can be a part of. Our specific pieces that correspond to the invitation to heal the sick are related to befriending the sick, challenging the systems that oppress and exclude people, and providing the spiritual care and guidance people need. You might be drawn to advocate for providing proper care to the ill. You might feel called to befriend and visit those who are sick. You might seek to heal the physical ailments through medical care. Or you might be adept in providing support to those seeking to heal from spiritual pain.

We can learn about spiritual pain and become proficient in helping others discover the power of God's love in their lives to release them from bondage. According to Richard Groves of the Sacred Art of Living Center, there are four dimensions of spiritual pain:

1. Meaning Pain: This is when one feels that their lives have become meaningless and that there is no purpose for their existence. In less severe cases, this is when one questions the purpose of their lives and may not be feeling that their lives make a difference in the world.
2. Forgiveness Pain: This is when we carry grudges or feel a strong sense of unforgiveness toward ourselves or others.
3. Relatedness Pain: This is when we feel isolated from others or even from God.
4. Hope Pain: This is when we feel hopeless about life and the future.

As you walked in today you were given a health assessment sheet. Spiritual Assessment: <https://sacredartofliving.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Spiritual-Health-Assessment-Rev-2015.pdf>. Take it home with you and consider using it for yourself or giving it to someone in your life who might be struggling. Once you or the person you know have identified the dimension of pain you are dealing with, then you can pray for healing. I believe that one of the greatest gifts we can use to contribute to the healing and wholeness of others is our ability to create sacred spaces where our souls could become more active in our daily lives and in allowing God to heal and release us. The

gift of faith is about helping others know how precious they are to God. Physical healing may or may not always happen when one's emotional and spiritual pain is released, but we know for sure that when we carry emotional or spiritual pain, we can never live fully to fulfill God's dream for the world. Prayer, spiritual friendship, spiritual practices, or spiritual readings are all about releasing the pain we experience and allowing God to fill our hearts with love. There is so much pain and sickness in our world today. The gift of healing that we bring to it is that of helping others see their value and potential even when they feel isolated, devalued, or useless.

The movie Patch Adams came to my mind when thinking about our call to heal the sick. After struggling with some mental illness, Patch Adams decided to become a doctor to help heal others. But while in medical school, he became disillusioned by how doctors treated patients without regard to their emotional health. Patch Adams dedicated his life to healing people, not just physically but emotionally. The key piece to all of his work was to see patients as human beings deserving of dignity and respect. This of course got him into trouble with other doctors. Let's watch a clip from a time when he was being investigated.

Patch Adams

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDEjgOFOLho>

In a way, Patch Adams is a good role model for us as a Christ figure. Treating those who are sick holistically and with a focus on their soul is the gift each of us could bring to the world. Getting sick is a very common human experience. We seek healing in many ways because there are different causes for sickness: Rest, medicine, and good food. As Christians we pray for healing and we believe that we can be agents of healing through spiritual care. We take the example of Jesus being a healer as a guide to us for ministry. The problem comes when we forget that our part of the healing process is that of spiritual care or care for the soul. As people of faith, we know that people carry a lot of spiritual pain and that our challenge is to bring the spiritual piece of healing to others. The Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara suggests that salvation is the movement toward healing and wholeness in the middle of the trials of our daily existence. It is "one moment of peace and tenderness in the midst of daily violence, music that calms our spirit, a novel that keeps us company, a glass of beer or a cup of coffee shared with another. These give us the desire to go on living. Salvation is a bright green garden where vegetables have sprouted after much effort. Salvation is a baby long awaited or a love letter that brings us back to life. Salvation is beauty, a garden on the earth where God walks. [...] Salvation is a get-together, an event, a sentiment, a kiss, a piece of bread [...]. It is everything that nourishes love, our body, our life." Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experiences of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 124-125.

Today as you consider your own calling to heal the sick, I invite you to consider which part of this big picture speaks to you

1. Restoring the dignity and social standing of the sick
2. Caring for the soul of those in pain.

Take a moment to reflect on these and if you feel comfortable, you can turn to your neighbors and share your leanings with them.

The best place to start is knowing where and how God heals us each day so that we may share from our own abundance of healing. Today, I am going to invite you to do two things, first is listen to words from Gunilla Norris about peace. The second part is to receive the gift of anointing right after communion. In both experiences, invite God to bring a special gift of healing to you whether you have physical or spiritual pain. Take a deep breath and center yourself and listen to the invitation of God's love.

“Peace is not absence of strife. Peace is acceptance and surrender to that which is. Peace is the profound awareness of the one true source from which all things emerge... and to which all things return. However lost we may feel, we are never outside of the source. We are intimately known by it, sustained by it, and returned to it - daily...now...and when we pass away...for no matter what occurs in our lives, we can always find our way home to the core, the truth of our being.”
Amen.