

A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO ILLNESS

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Text: John 9:1-2

When I was in clinical training in Minnesota's Twin Cities, there was a chaplain trainer who was known for his unorthodox manners. To begin with, he broke one of the cardinal rules of bedside counseling. He started out by asking the person, "Why are you sick?" He did it quite deliberately, for he knew that nearly always, whether the patient was religious or not, the patient was already turning that question over in their minds. They were already secretly thinking: which sin, which offense, which failing in themselves or in their past was finally coming for its payback. The chaplain's unorthodox question simply brought the matter out for the patient to talk about.

Which I believe illustrates a universal fact: No matter where in the world's cultures or religions you look, you find this deep human propensity to view sickness as a judgment. Somewhere in us all is the primal assumption that health and wealth are the favor of the gods, and sickness and misfortune represent their disfavor.

It was surely so in the Hebrew culture of Jesus' day. When Jesus and the disciples came upon a man born blind from his birth, the disciples popped the *why* question? Why was this man born blind? Was it his sin or the sin of his parents? They didn't ask *whether* sin led to the sickness, but *whose* sin. That sickness was God's direct judgment for sin: *that* was their deeply held assumption.

It was in the face of this assumption that Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God AND healing all who came to him. You find those two functions of Jesus' ministry linked together like twins all through the Gospels: He preached and he healed. "The kingdom of God is at hand," preached Jesus. And the chief evidence of that kingdom's presence was Jesus' healing opposition to the powers of suffering and sickness that brought harm and pain to God's children.

Here is the heart of the Christian message: Far from sending sickness and oppression and death, God stepped into history in the person of Jesus to establish a beachhead *against* these things. One-fifth of the New Testament Gospel accounts are devoted to Jesus' healing encounters.

It was the hope of salvation come true, the Day of the Lord foretold by the prophets of old:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
the ears of the deaf unsealed,
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy.¹

Not just salvation of the soul in eternity, you see, but the invasion of God's life-mending power in this world's brokenness of the here and now. That was the message of Jesus' ministry.

¹ Isaiah 35:5-6

Not only was God's healing motive the centerpiece of Jesus' earthly ministry. It became the centerpiece of the early church's ministry as well. The same author who penned the gospel of Luke also wrote the Book of Acts. Luke and Acts are volumes one and two of the same work. The way the author introduces Acts is very intriguing.

"My former volume," he says, "was an account of all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach until he was taken up to heaven." The implication? That the book of Acts is an account of all that Jesus continued to do through His Spirit empowered disciples. And so the writer of Acts goes to pains throughout his work to show Jesus' disciples doing the same kinds of healing miracles that Jesus did in his.

It is clear that the early disciples understood this call to healing ministry, for across the church's first thousand years, prayers for healing, anointing for healing, liturgies for healing, continued to be the heart of the church's worship and witness. The practice of *Unction*, the anointing of the sick for healing, became recognized as one of the sacraments of the church right along with the bread and cup. We see it in the book of James: "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord."²

So what's the point? Just this: If the ministry of healing was right up alongside the ministry of teaching and preaching in the life of Jesus and a sacrament right alongside the bread and cup the early church, why is it so scantily regarded in the church today? Today, you will find the ministry of preaching and teaching and bread and cup at the heart of just about any church, liberal or conservative. But where is the ministry of healing?

History gives us a clue.

Many of the great scholars in the second and third centuries who influenced the church's thought were steeped in a dualistic Greek view of human nature which taught that the body is evil and that the soul is good. The Hebrews had no such dualistic view of human nature. To the Hebrew, the body and soul and spirit are one and indistinguishable and indivisible. In the teaching of the New Testament, Jesus came to redeem not just the soul, but to heal the body—the ultimate healing of which is the resurrection. But as Greek thought increasingly pervaded the church, the view of the physical nature as inherently corrupt and expendable weakened the emphasis on the necessity for physical healing.

Then came the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas's scholasticism, which was largely rooted, once again, in Greek thought had a huge impact upon the theology of the later church. Aquinas taught that God is known primarily through the pursuit of the mind rather than through physical experience. "Thus the early theologians supplied good reasoning to back up the ... shift away from the practice of religious healing."³

Then after Aquinas came the horrendous plagues that befell Europe: the repeated invasions of foreign hordes which butchered tens of thousands, the Arab pirates who gained control of the Mediterranean, the plagues that wiped out vast populations. "The important thing," writes Morton Kelsey, "was not to find some comfort in this life—what could hardly be expected—but rather to insure a good existence after death. Care of the soul became much more important than care of the body."⁴ *Unction*, the sacrament for healing became "Extreme Unction," the sacrament for the dying.

² James 5:13-14

³ *Healing and Christianity*, Morton Kelsey, Harper and Row, New York, 1973, p. 205

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 203

Then came the Protestant Reformation, which, in reaction to the superstition and hocus pocus that had infected the Roman Catholic Church, threw out the sacrament of Unction and, with it, the remaining vestiges of divine healing as a ministry of the church. Both Luther and Calvin, the fathers of the Protestant Church, taught that while God had intervened at one time with miracles of healing to substantiate Christ's and his church's ministry, such demonstrations were no longer believable in the modern age.

This led to the final conclusion in the Protestant Church that if sickness were not something to be healed by will of God, then it must be something to be endured as a discipline sent from God to cleanse and purge the soul, a conclusion which was crystallized into the ministrations for the sick in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. "Whatsoever your sickness is," says the book, "know you certainly that it is God's visitation."

Sickness! God's visitation! How many of us have been taught that, either explicitly or implicitly, in our church experience. How many of us, when we or someone else gets sick, instinctively think or even say that this is God's work of discipline or God's work of judgment upon our or their lives! You see the significance of the chaplain's question to his suffering patients: "Why are you sick." A good many of us have been trained to think that God has a redemptive reason for this suffering.

My, how far the church has drifted from the example of our Lord, who never once in his teaching or ministry suggested that sickness was the work of God or the judgment of God or the tool of God. To Jesus, sickness was the enemy of God which he entered history to oppose.

So what does this mean for us? Just this: If healing and the expectation of God's intervention in healing was the heart of the ministry of Jesus, and of the mission of the church he commissioned, should it not be more at the heart of ours? And how, in practical terms can we make it so?

First, by following the prescription of James: "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord." We call our doctors and we should, for the medical sciences are also God's healing resource. But should we not also call our church for prayers of healing? And should our leaders be trained not only in preaching and teaching and sacraments but also the ministration of prayers for healing?

When my daughter was born 7 weeks early, she had one setback after another. I called the elders of the church I was a member of at the time and asked several of them who believed in the healing power of God to come with me and pray over my daughter. I cannot say what part that prayer played in my daughter's turn to progress, but I can say that there was such power in that experience that several of the nurses on the unit were quite awed by what they witnessed. One of them, honest to God, later told me that it was a key to her deciding to go on to seminary.

In the church I served in Portland, there was a woman whose husband came to me asking for prayer for his wife. The cancer that had been chased away from her breast years before had now reappeared in her liver and brain.

Both Steve and Kay were flight attendants for a major Airline. I went with Steve to pray for his wife in their home. While I was praying for her, the passage in James about anointing the sick came to my mind. I asked Kay whether she might want to have a gathering of friends and family to anoint her for healing at a later date in the church

sanctuary. She had never heard of such a thing before but, yes, she said she would. When the day came and I arrived for the occasion in the church's sanctuary, I was astounded that more than forty people came out to the event, and that most of them were Kay's fellow flight attendants, many of whom were not churchgoers. Some of the people who prayed over Kay that afternoon told me later that they had never prayed out loud before in their lives. One thing is for sure: those who were present in that healing service felt the power of God's compassion over Kay, as it was released through our prayers. It was a transformative experience for Kay and everyone involved, even though Kay's cancer continued to progress and she died the following summer.

The healing of God comes in many forms. I do not pretend to understand why some forms of healing take place in one instance and other kinds in another. I have seen prayers of feeble faith result in miracles—even since I've been here in this church. And I have seen prayers of great fervency fail to bring their appreciated end. We are not called to understand God's healing methods with God's children. But we are called to be an environment of faith and prayer where God's methods may be applied, where God's Spirit of compassion and care are visibly experienced. Not just a ministry of preaching and teaching and sacrament, you see, but a ministry of healing where the power of the gospel breaks into experience of people in visible, palpable ways!

What is to be our Christian response to illness? That is the question we are posing. If Jesus is our example and the heart of the early church is our model, then the answer is clear: We are called to a healing community, called to reflect the very ministry of Jesus who healed the sick and still heals them today. "As the Father has sent me," he said, "so I am sending you."

This coming year, I propose that we make this one of our core pursuits, to think of ways to increase our healing presence in the community. To provide regular opportunities for healing prayer in our worship and in open services to which the community is invited. In the coming months, let's think and talk together and brainstorm ideas about how we can, even more, be instruments and arms and hands of God's healing, redeeming, life-giving presence in the world.