

A TIME FOR HEALING
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I picked this Sunday for the Litany of Healing without looking at the readings. Why, because almost every Sunday we can find something about healing in the readings. This Sunday fit the design of my plans for Lent and it is a fourth Sunday which is our usual Sunday for healing prayer. Sure enough, there is mention of healing in our Gospel. Today we have the warning to flee from Harrod and Jesus answers that he will not flee but will continue to cast out demons and perform cures until the end.

The Pharisees were warning Jesus to flee Harrod. What this might have really meant was get out of town and go be a problem for somebody else like Pilate. The Pharisees did not like Jesus, they feared the power he had and they were angry with him. Jesus had a strong connection between sin and illness and was just as likely to tell the person, your sins are forgiven, take up you mat and walk. That was in the gospel this week for Morning Prayer on Thursday.

This anger at his healings has a theological basis. They are asking in effect, who does he think he is? They had a theology of if illness that viewed illness as a punishment from God for some transgression. If this is from God how dare Jesus interfere with God's judgment? First of all, Jesus is God so that should settle that. Although claiming that he was the Son of God ultimately gets him into much deeper trouble.

The healing of people was a central part of Jesus ministry while on earth. There are almost 50 different healings in the four Gospels. Yet this attitude of the Pharisees about healings still has a lot of traction even today.

Listen to what a Book of Common Prayer from 1849 says in the opening prayer for the ministrations to the sick:

“Dearly Beloved, know this that Almighty God is the Lord of life and death and of all things to them pertaining: as youth, strength, health, age, weakness, and sickness. Wherefore, whatsoever; you sickness be, know you certainly that it is God's visitation. And for that cause soever this sickness be sent unto you; whether it be to try your patience for the example of other, and that your faith may be found, in the day of the Lord, laudable glorious and honorable to the increase of glory and endless felicity, or else it be sent unto you to correct and amend in you whatsoever doth offend the eyes of your heavenly Father; know you certainly, that if you truly repent you of your sins, and bear your sickness patiently, trusting in God's mercy for his dear Son Jesus Christ's sake and render unto him humble thanks for his fatherly

visitation submitting yourself wholly unto his will it shall turn to your profit and help you forward in the right way that leadeth unto everlasting life.”

Now I know that this was intended to comfort the person, but I certainly would not feel comforted in any way. This attitude however did pretty well stop any type of healing prayer for centuries. It is really only in the last 100 years that healing prayer has returned to mainstream Christianity. Vestiges of the older theology still hold sway, often to the detriment of the average person. As a teacher I dealt with parents who felt a disabled child was a punishment from God for some sin that they had committed. The scripture question on the General Ordination Exam that Wendy just took centered on this issue of illness as punishment for sin. Obviously this is still a theological problem and one we need to attend to.

That takes us to the healing litany that we will do in just a few minutes. This comes from the Enriching Our Worship liturgies for the ministration to sick and dying. Enriching Our Worship liturgies are ones that have been prepared as we move forward into what will eventually be the next prayer book revision.

We have come a long way in our theology of healing since that prayer that I read. Since this is the first time we have done this service, please open your bulletin and look at this Litany of Healing. What does the Litany of Healing say about our theology of healing?

Time for discussion

The difference in theology is obvious from the start. “your will for all people is health and salvation.” This statement is the absolute opposite of the image of God as the one who sends disease to teach a lesson or punishment. When Phyllis Tickle talks about emergent Christianity have trouble with traditional Christianity the\is type of image of God the Father is often a central concern. I have great trouble with the image of God that the Pharisees had and that has dominated Christianity for centuries.

Notice that in all these prayers we are not telling God what to do. What we ask for is the restoration of wholeness, but we do not specify what it is we want God to do. This litany acknowledges that it is God who knows best how to restore wholeness. Sometimes the healing needed is what Agnes Sanford calls the ultimate healing which is death. Sometimes the body is so damaged that the only way to restore the person to wholeness is for the person to move on to the next reality, whatever that looks like.

Notice all the different types of healing that are present in this prayer. Not just physical, but emotional and spiritual healing. There also are prayers for the healing of relationships that have been broken by our actions and the actions of others.

Healing implies restoration of wholeness and also change. Jesus asks people “do you want to be healed?” In reality he is asking do you want to be changed? Do you want to be returned to a state of wholeness or would you rather stay sick? If we are returned to wholeness, we may then be asked to change. The beggar by the gate who has made his living for his entire life by begging now has to find a new way to make a living!

So too I hope that when we are healed of whatever cripples us, in mind, body or spirit we then are asked to move forward into something different. I do not believe that we are simply healed to go our merry way, but are called to a new relationship with the one who has healed us.

This is what the next few weeks or Lent are about. We have prayed for forgiveness in the Great Litany, asked to be healed and now will be sent forth to do the work of the gospel.