

Healing Prayer

September 26, 2021 Sermon by Stephen Portner

James 5:13-20

13 Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

19 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

I heard a quote from Mother Teresa this last week I really like. She said:

I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world.

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I am a little pencil in god's hands. He does the thinking. He does the writing. He does everything and sometimes it is really hard because it is a broken pencil and he has to sharpen it a little more.

I picture this little pencil, like you might use while playing miniature golf, which is also broken. A little stub of a thing. That needs sharpening. And I realize that I am like that too. A broken pencil that needs sharpening – but, amazingly, God uses broken pencils like that to do amazing things. And that is because it is God who is working through us, not because of any credit we deserve.

Healing prayer is like that. James writes: *Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective* (James 5:14-16). The question is: Do we believe it? Do we believe

that God is able to work through the prayers of the likes of us effectively to heal others of their brokenness?

Some of us may think we are too broken for God to use. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church and author of "The Purpose Driven Life" was asked what requirements he had for pastors to join his staff, other than that they had to be followers of Jesus. Warren responded that he required his pastors to have been deeply wounded first. When they have hired pastors who had not been wounded or broken first, they kept their distance from others and there was a lack of relatability. In order for people to be effective healers, they need to be wounded healers.

At the end of June this last year, we had a healing prayer service for Christine at my home church in Lee, NY. It lasted probably about twenty minutes and as a result, Christine regained some of her sense of smell and her sense of taste that she had lost after contracting COVID-19 last November. This was through prayer offered by the pastor and a few lay people who surrounded Christine in prayer. I used to have prayers for others like that here in our church before COVID made it so we needed to isolate ourselves and avoid touching others. Kind of hard to lay on hands when you're not supposed to touch someone. So, I fell out of the habit of offering healing prayer. And, like others have experienced related to the church and keeping holy habits, once you get out of the habit, it is challenging to get back into it again.

This last week Christine and I have been in Murfreesboro, TN for a gathering called New Room. It is a gathering of orthodox Christians from various Wesleyan denominations – including Church of the Nazarene, Salvation Army, Free Methodists, AME Zion, and others, including United Methodists. At the end of one of the services there, the leader talked about the wounds of Jesus. We know that Jesus had scars on his body where the nails from the cross had pierced his hands and feet and where the spear had entered his side. He offered to let the disciple Thomas put his fingers in the wounds to prove that Jesus really was who he said he was and that he had risen from the dead. Thomas had realized that wasn't necessary, and he believed Jesus really did rise again from the dead. The leader of the service used the phrase, "the wounds of Jesus touch our wounds and heal us." And then they offered a time for healing prayer after the service, which Christine and I took advantage of. Those words, "Jesus' wounds touch our wounds" really moved us.

Then I went to a mini-course on healing prayer. The same speaker who talked about "Jesus' wounds touch our wounds" and "Jesus' scars touch our scars" also led part of the course. He shared that he once prayed for the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. When the Lord granted him the gift, he thought, "Really? That's it?" He wasn't too

impressed with the gift and did not practice his gift. And then later he was convicted about that. Why did he ask for the gift if he wasn't even going to use it? And, just like any gift, you are not really going to understand how to use it unless you practice with it.

After the speaker said that, I was convicted in my spirit. It was obvious to me that the Lord has given me the spiritual gift of healing. When I arrived here in 2015 I was a broken pastor. I had recently had a heart attack and was feeling pretty lowly of myself and my ability to be an effective pastor. When I arrived in 2015 this was a broken church. My first three months here was spent largely with people coming into the office to tell me their feelings, positive and negative, regarding the state of the church and the concern that the church was in free fall. I was a broken pastor assigned to a broken church. Doesn't seem like a real good combination does it? And yet, through the grace of God – and I truly believe it was only through the grace of God – that the Holy Spirit equipped me to be the wounded healer this congregation needed and that you were the congregation this wounded healer needed to make a turnaround.

But, to be honest, I was beginning to disdain my gift of healing, although I did not realize I was disdaining the gift. I was just asking God for another gift, because I was not satisfied with the one I had received. I was lamenting to God, "God, won't you give me the gift of evangelism? I don't need to be a Billy Graham of anything. Even if we had two people each week give their lives to Christ. I would be happy with that." Or, "God, couldn't I have the gift of music instead of healing? That way maybe I could be the worship leader this congregation needs. If I could just be a worship leader that could get the people fired up for worship, then maybe we could grow this church." There's other gifts I have asked for as well. But I sensed in my heart, God was pointing out to me that I wasn't using the gift he had already given me. Why am I asking for another? What is it I am willing to do with the gift I have?

A spiritual gift will only improve in its effectiveness if you practice it. Someone who plays a musical instrument did not pick up the instrument the very first time and play a beautiful song. It takes practice. A person who never used a paint brush doesn't paint a beautiful picture on the first try. It takes practice. Anybody who practices a trade didn't get good at what they are doing without first practicing the trade. The same holds true with a spiritual gift. You have to practice it and you get better at using it the more you practice it. At the end of the mini-course, the leaders commissioned us as healers. And at the end of this service I want to provide a time for healing prayer for any who need it.

I should never have disdained my spiritual gift of healing. It may not cause the church to bloom and grow, but it is a needed gift for a time such as this. I have lost track of how many people have come to me, especially during this time when we are still dealing with

COVID and all its collateral damage, and said they are lonely, broken, ready to give up. Now is the time for healing and for believing that these words in James are just as true today as they were when he first wrote them: *the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.*

What is it we are doing with our spiritual gift to be a love letter of God to the world?