

"Forgiveness and Healing"

The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor J. Stewart Hardy

October 16, 2005
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 43:8-13; Psalm 124;
2 Timothy 4:5-11; Luke 4:14-21

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

My initial experiences of healing in a Christian sense are both personally deeply disturbing and incredibly painful. When I was around 14 or 15, one of the members of our congregation, Frank Fordham, was diagnosed with a brain tumor, an inoperable cancer. The outlook was not good.

Our youth group decided that the least we could do was pray for him; but we figured it wouldn't really be prayer if it didn't cost us something, so as 14, 15 and 16 year olds, we met faithfully every Saturday morning at our church . . . at 7:00 a.m. Every week we prayed. And Frank's condition continued to worsen, until he died. As a group we never met again for such a purpose, and the whole experience left me deeply troubled.

Why hadn't God answered our prayers? Well, there was only one answer: something had to be wrong. It couldn't be with Frank; after all, he was very active in the church, he supported the youth, and was a prominent lay leader in the congregation. Then there had to be something wrong with our group. Or with our leader. Or was it me?

Or was something wrong with God? Didn't he listen to kids? Or at least teens? Was he sort of something like our parents when we asked for something difficult and costly, always answering something like, "Well, we'll see", which of course, every teenager knows, means "No". Was God just plain picky?

I became somewhat skeptical of prayer and wondered about God. The strange thing is, now that I look back on it, I never spoke to anyone or asked anyone about it, I just thought about it myself. And I thought about it quite a lot.

About sixteen years later, I was really sick myself. I was diagnosed with cancer which, at the time of diagnosis, was considered to be well advanced. I was living in Toronto at the time and was placed under the care of a research team that was dealing exclusively with the type of cancer I had. And after pre-surgery examination, they told me I could expect to live for about 18 months.

That didn't drive me back to prayer; I had continued to pray. But I was past praying for miraculous or magical cures. I accepted the doctors for their knowledge and their skills. If I had 18 months, I had 18 months. The real question became, what was I going to do with those 18 months? What was I going to do with each day? That was the object of my prayer, and it caused me to adjust my thinking in a number of ways. I no longer expect that

tomorrow is mine for the having but tomorrow, if and when it comes, comes as a real gift. I didn't pray to be cured, but I did pray to live wisely. It was my family and friends and others who prayed for a complete recovery. And here I am; I've survived.

And then some years later, my brother became ill with cancer and he, too, was given 18 months to live. I loved my brother deeply, and I prayed for his recovery every day. The whole family prayed for him. My home town prayed for him. The churches prayed for him. My parents and he went and sought out all sorts of miraculous faith healers and preachers and they did all the things they could think of, so that my brother would be cured. But he died. And he died within the 18 months. I was shaken to the core, and my heart was broken. Why did my brother die and I survive?

The questions started all over again, but this time with excruciating pain and a good dollop of guilt besides. Why him and not me? It took years for me to begin to make sense of what the scriptures are talking about when they deal with all these healing stories. And suddenly it dawned on me that what I had been seeking were cures, not healings. Check it out in the dictionary sometime; there's a substantial difference.

The passage read to us this morning from Luke's gospel gives us considerable insight into what's going on when Jesus heals, and what it is for God in Jesus to heal people. In the gospel, Jesus was invited to read the scriptures and comment on the reading in his home church. It was quite an honor, although any male of the congregation, at any time, could be called upon to fulfill the self-same duty. Wouldn't that be great to return to these days? I don't hear much enthusiasm from you!

According to Luke, Jesus quotes Isaiah, and herein lies the foundation for the rest of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, at least as Luke records it. I want you to listen carefully to exactly what is said, or should I say, written: "'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"

God, in His unconditional love for his people, through Christ, will heal the diseases of the body and the dis-ease of the soul. In Jesus' time, these two elements of human suffering were understood to be inseparably intertwined. Any illness was understood to be the result of human sinfulness and a breach in one's relationship with God. If that was the case, little wonder there was great consternation among the religious authorities when Jesus restored people to wholeness and health. Such action demonstrated that Jesus was doing what only God Himself was expected to do – forgiving people, restoring them in relationship to God and so making them righteous.

And this is the whole point of the healing accounts in the gospels – to make it abundantly clear to everyone that it was the power of God that resided in and worked through the healing actions of Jesus of Nazareth. Similarly, the disciples were empowered to enact

healing, and again, that the power of the spirit given them in Pentecost might be manifest in the healing they brought to those who sought their help.

But in our time, we have a much more sophisticated understanding of the human body and its workings. We have been able to separate the dis-ease of the soul from the disease of the body. We have put to use the great gifts of intelligence and ingenuity with which God has blessed us. We look to doctors and hospitals and medicines to cure our illnesses and modify our disabilities. And here it is important to understand that faith is not meant to, nor does it, displace medical science; that healing does not displace curing. Neither does medicine replace faith and the laying on of hands and anointing. But for the Christian, it is quite clear that faith, that anointing, that the laying on of hands does enhance the powers and practice of medical treatment, though it should not be expected to replace them. There remains, if you will, what we might call the problem of the dis-eased soul. Those thoughts and words and deeds of ours which cause us distress, both in and of themselves and in their consequences within our relationships with others. It's this healing, in our most honest moments, that we all seek. And it is in being anointed and receiving the laying on of hands, that we receive such healing.

I was finally able to grasp this and put it all together for myself during a church-wide assembly in Milwaukee that I attended two years ago. At one of the worship services at the assembly, we were offered the opportunity (over a thousand of us) to come forward and receive anointing and the laying on of hands. It was there, as a pastor laid her hands on my head and marked the cross of Christ with oil on my forehead, that I understood. I had been cured of my cancer, just as others had been cured before and since; Frank and my brother had not. But neither had thousands of people in Jesus' time. Some were fortunate enough to be cured, but many others suffered through their disease and died. But then, Jesus wasn't sent to cure all of Israel, was he? Jesus was sent to show us, in a human being, the divine reality of God. To show us that God loves us with an unconditional love, and that He sees us as and for what we really are. Then, in Christ, He extends to us forgiveness, hope, and, at the last, resurrection to live everlasting.

God bless my brother for all he did with me and for me. And God bless Frank Fordham for all he did for us teens back home. Now I can entrust them to God's keeping, knowing that they have received God's ultimate healing – to be with Him, in His grace, for a life eternal. So may it be for us.

Amen.