

Preaching on Faith and Healing

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“You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” (Acts 10:36-38¹) (*Revised Common Lectionary* – Year A – Easter, April 24, 2011).

How do we preach on healing? What, for that matter, do we understand the word *healing* to mean? What has the church meant by the term, and how have Christians engaged in acts of healing over the centuries? And why might Easter be a time we would especially want to focus on healing in our preaching? What follows are some reflections on these questions, along with an invitation to you to consider your own answers.

What Is Healing?

Before we can preach on healing, we must come to some clarity about what we think healing is. I often begin the very first session of my Introduction to Pastoral Care class with this very question: “What is healing?” Every year, a lively discussion ensues, as the blackboard is filled with students’ definitions and reflections. A consensus usually emerges, that healing is more than simply a matter of “cure” and also more than something “just” physical. Healing encompasses body, mind, and spirit—and has to do with both individuals and communities. Healing can be physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and cultural/communal. This accords well with the etymology of *healing*, from the Old English word *hælan*.² Along with the word *health*, it is closely related to our English words *whole* and *wholeness*. Healing is therefore more than a fix or a cure. It is a restoration to wholeness.

As a gerund, *heal-ing* refers not only to an outcome or a fixed state, but to an ongoing process. In this sense, not only recovery from injury and illness, but all growth is a form of ongoing healing across the entire lifespan. Theologically, this is akin to the concept of *sanctification*—our ongoing movement toward holiness as baptized persons. We are continually being drawn by the Spirit to grow more and more into the stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13). Our healing, then, is perhaps the very same thing at a fundamental level as our calling as Christians.

We may think of *healing* and *salvation* as separate, with salvation as something more “spiritual” (as in “saving souls”) and healing more pertaining to the physical body. This is a misconception, based largely on the unfortunate split between mind or spirit and body, which was imported into Christianity from Greek philosophy (especially Plato and the neo-Platonists). Salvation, from the medieval Latin *salvationem*, is Jerome’s translation of the Greek *sozo* (from which we get the word *soteriology*—the study of salvation) with a strong implication of salvation as release from *sin* and *death*.

Morton Kelsey and Morris Maddocks, authors of classic texts on Christian healing and the church, describe a turn in the middle ages away from a ministry of actual healing to a more symbolic understanding of healing as the spiritual cure of sins.³ Think of the English word *salve*, however, which is related etymologically to *salvation*. The Greek *soteria* itself is a word meaning cure and healing, not only redemption from a state of spiritual bondage or sin. “There is a balm in Gilead.” Salvation is healing, and healing is salvation.

Illness and sin have a long relationship in Christian soteriology. The word *sin* of course encompasses many meanings. It may refer to an individual’s misdeeds (“my sins”) ranging from minor peccadilloes to heinous crimes; an inherent tendency toward wrongdoing and imperfection (“sin” more generally as a feature of the human condition); a communal involvement in causing pain and suffering toward others (“corporate sin” as in our complicity in systems of evil and oppression worldwide); or even the theological category of “original sin” as in the classical Augustinian or Thomist understandings—the human tendency to err and turn from the good, inherited from Adam’s Fall in the Garden of Eden. Because illness and injury strike at both *psyche* (mind/spirit) and *soma* (body),⁴ it makes sense that the Christian tradition has linked them with sin, if only because when one is in a state of personal “dis-ease,” questions of “why” and “how” may lead to examinations of conscience and personal responsibility.⁵ For this reason, services of anointing for healing often include a brief order for confession and forgiveness.

Caution must be exercised, however, in not using such liturgical forms to blame an individual for his or her illness or traumatic experience or to reinforce unrealistic and shame-laden self-blame. In the context of healing liturgies, it may be helpful to think about sin in terms of the shared brokenness of creation, of which we are all a part, so that our prayers and rituals for healing may help us to join with God’s desire—in the beautiful words of the ancient Jewish mystics—for the mending of the whole world, *tikkun o’lam*. We might also think of sin more existentially as a condition of alienation or separation from God.⁶ Our prayers and rituals for healing, then, are ways in which we offer ourselves up to God’s healing action within us, expressing our longing to be close to God again and asking God/Christ/Spirit to help us be in harmony with God and one another, yearning for an original state of wholeness—*atonement* as *at-one-ment* with the Holy.⁷

Perhaps because healing is so intertwined with wholeness, communal as well as individual, it is no surprise, then, when acts of healing directed toward one person often engender a mutual experience of healing and wholeness in the one doing the ministry, or a more general sharing of healing blessing among an entire family and community. Sometimes it seems as though the most significant experience of healing is in a person or persons other than the one for whom the healing rite was intended. Bishop Mark Dyer of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, told a story in a sermon a few years ago, in which he described a visit to Mother Teresa’s order in Calcutta, India.⁸ A man in the advanced stages of leprosy approached the bishop and asked him for a laying on of hands for healing. “Imprisoned by my fear,” the bishop asked advice from one of the sisters who was also a medical doctor. She replied, “What would Jesus do?” He said, “No, no, I wanted your clinical opinion,” to which she replied, “That was my clinical opinion!” In that moment, he experienced a release from his fears. He looked into the disfigured face of the man with leprosy and saw the face of Christ.

Laying his hands on the man's head, Bishop Dyer felt that God was present in a powerful moment of connectedness. Who was healed in the encounter? Surely the bishop as much as the man with leprosy. "Perfect love casts out fear" (I John 4:18).

The Church's Healing Ministry

The early church, based on both biblical and contemporaneous witnesses, was far less conflicted about actual practices of healing than we are in most churches today. The apostles based their healing practices on the pattern of Jesus' own numerous acts of healing⁹—which notably did not distinguish between body and soul and often accomplished a restoration of persons to communities from which they had been ostracized. Jesus' acts of healing were signs of the in-breaking of God's realm of wholeness and restoration—a realized eschatology in which all manner of reversals restore the cosmos to health, freedom from ignorance, want, and fear. Jesus' acts of healing the blind and the deaf, lepers and hemorrhaging women, raising up the lame to pick up their mats and walk, and even raising the dead to walk again were simultaneously concrete works of transformation in the lives of suffering persons and communities, and proclamations about the radically transformed and transformative nature of the "kingdom of God," in which health and healing would and already did prevail (e.g., Luke 7:21-22). This proclamation was inextricably linked with justice: "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, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-10).

The Book of Acts records acts of healing by the apostles that flowed in continuity from both Christ's example and his direct commission. The epistles are also filled with accounts of "signs and wonders" (Rom. 15:17-19, 2 Cor. 12:12). Maddocks cites James 5:14-16 as having become the "proper" or liturgical pattern for conducting healing liturgies:¹⁰

Are any among you sick? Let them call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. (James 5:14-16)

The quality of care and concern exhibited by Christians for one another, along with such acts of literal healing, contributed to the growth of Christianity in its earliest days, even under threat of persecution. However, as Maddocks and others have pointed out, with the legalization of Christianity after the Edict of Milan by Constantine in 313 C.E., "a drop in the spiritual temperature...led to a lack of awareness of Christ's healing power and a preoccupation with the great need to organize the Church, codify its law and systematize its theology."¹¹ A turn to scholarly theology meant a turn away from superstition, and miracles came to be downplayed as inferior magic, culminating in the intellectualism of the high middle ages. After the Reformation, Protestants in particular saw healing rituals as linked with popular superstition and Catholic ritualism. Evangelical movements, however, from the nineteenth century on,

saw spontaneous physical healing linked with spiritual awakenings and conversion experiences. Methodism in its various branches, many Baptist churches, and especially Pentecostal churches did not separate spiritual salvation from—sometimes quite dramatic—experiences of physical healing. Missionaries spread powerful messages of faith healing throughout the Eastern and Southern hemispheres, where Christian understandings of healing ministry joined indigenous spiritual healing practices to form powerful beliefs about the healing power of prayer and ritual.

In more sedate expressions of Christianity in Europe and North America, this recognition took much longer and has been more subdued and partial. It was not until a recovery of many ancient practices of the church through the liturgical renewal movement of the twentieth century (with its precursor in nineteenth century movements to recover the theology and practices of the “primitive church,” as in the Oxford movement in England) that a general interest in rites of healing was renewed in the modern church. A charismatic movement swept both Catholicism and Anglicanism in the 1960’s and is represented in a small but fervent subset of “mainline” Protestant and Catholic churches who practice rituals of faith healing today. Liturgical healing rites are incorporated much more widely among the so-called “liturgical” churches, especially Roman Catholic, Episcopal/Anglican, Lutheran, some Presbyterian, and many Eastern Orthodox churches. Healing stations are frequently offered at the time of the Eucharist during Sunday morning worship, and many churches now offer midweek or Sunday evening healing services as well. Some clergy and lay members have also explored connections between therapeutic touch or “bodywork” (at times drawing from non-Western and non-Christian resources), and Christian healing ministries.¹² While the necessity of paying attention to safe boundaries calls for great sensitivity, care, awareness of power differentials and ethical duties, and optimally the frequent use of peer and professional supervision, such practices have been beneficial in some contexts.

Within the Protestant liturgical renewal movement, there has been a recovery of all the “lesser sacraments” (whether or not viewed as sacraments *per se*, sacramental rites, or historical rituals of the church). Anointing has been expanded beyond its historic narrowing to use only at the time of death (“extreme unction”) to a more general return to the use of unction for anyone in need of healing. Many denominations have now published rites for laying on of hands and anointing. In some regional bodies of the church (dioceses, synods, conferences, etc.), clergy come together on Maundy Thursday to renew their ordination vows, share in the Eucharist, and participate in a time of communal blessing of oils for both baptism and healing, which they then take back to their parishes for use throughout the year. While some may (probably rightly) criticize these “chrism masses” as celebrations of an excessive clericalism, such practices at their most sincere link clergy and congregations to one another in a recognition that healing is not the work of an individual priest or pastor, but an outpouring of grace that is shared throughout the Christian communion. Gordon Lathrop, a Lutheran liturgical scholar, suggests that the same baptismal chrism oil be used for unction, making explicit the link between the salvation proclaimed in the ritual of anointing for healing and the salvation already promised in the sacrament of baptism.¹³

One of the dangers of laying on of hands and anointing is that it may be all too easy for a person—whether lay or ordained—to begin to confuse the act of invoking

God's healing power with one's own claim to possess healing powers. This is probably why some clergy and churches turn away from more dramatic enactments of healing—not just because such powerful experiences might be considered unseemly by the “frozen chosen,” but because they perceive a real danger in confusing the charism (gift) of healing with the personal charisma of the one performing the healing ritual. Screaming televangelists, unboundaried exorcists (particularly as portrayed in movies and novels, but also, sadly in real life), Appalachian snake handlers, and charismatic “high-church” priests wielding bells, incense, and candles with spooky zeal reveal the perils of narcissism that lurk beneath the desire to be a healer. Whether in healing rituals or in our pastoral care and counseling, we may fall into the trap of wanting to be “special carers,”¹⁴ uniquely gifted and indispensable to those we serve. The need to be needed or to be special should be a warning bell that signals a need for peer consultation or supervision—and certainly not elevation to a special status as endowed with “supernatural” healing powers.

What is the best theological remedy for avoiding this trap? I ask my students the question: “What is the church's primary ritual for healing?” It's a trick question, of course. Many say, “anointing” or “unction.” But when I say, “Think again,” most respond correctly: “The Eucharist.” As I think about this further, we might say *both* baptism and Eucharist. Baptism, as the sacrament of initiation by which we are made one with the Body of Christ and marked as Christ's own forever, is commonly understood as the sacrament of justification—salvation through participation in Christ's death and resurrection. Eucharist, as the sacrament of our ongoing participation in the Body of Christ, and our communion, our at-one-ment, with Christ and one another, is similarly understood as the sacrament of sanctification—ongoing salvation, reconciliation, growth in holiness and faith. While diverse traditions will interpret these distinctively, with varying emphases, it may be seen that if baptism is the sacrament of initiation into salvation, Eucharist is the sacrament of continuing salvation/sanctification, and as we have examined previously, salvation and healing are the same movement of the Spirit, then baptism and Eucharist are the church's primary means of healing.

The definition of the sacraments, as in my Anglican tradition (borrowing from the catechism of the *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer*), suggests this: “The Sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.”¹⁵ Liturgies and sacramental rites of healing, laying on of hands, and anointing are particular expressions of the larger blessing with which we are already richly endowed by baptism and Holy Communion. As such, they are also always communal—even when the healing ritual seems to be for just one person. Christians in the “Two-Thirds World” have much to teach those of us in the West about interdependence and the communal nature of illness, healing, and wellbeing. Mercy Oduyoye notes that the Yoruba word *Alafia*, together with *Shalom* and *Salaam*, point to African religion's central value of relatedness—involving God, persons, and *all* creation.¹⁶ When one is healed, the community is restored to wholeness.

Finally, as in all sacramental activity, it is Christ who is the great healer, not ourselves. We forget this at our peril. Pastoral theologian Sharon Thornton has even critiqued the traditional inclusion of “healing” as one of the four basic pastoral functions (healing, guiding, sustaining, and reconciling¹⁷), because such a use of the

term implies that we do the healing, as individuals, as part of our pastoral charge, and also may neglect the more communal and justice-making context to which healing belongs.¹⁸ In Thornton's words:

Healing is something to be received, not something to be grasped or engineered. From this perspective healing comes not from inner strength and self-understanding alone, but through just relationships that are hospitable to the healing presence of the holy. The reign of God, the realm of the holy, is the locus of healing; it is a realm not conceived of or executed by technology, not even psychological or spiritual technology. Healing that is the basis for hope in history, a gift and a sign that the realm of justice is present in our midst, needs to be understood within this intricate web of human/divine relationships. Restoring wholeness refers to repairing the whole web. The aim of pastoral care as reconciliation means creating justice for this entire cosmos.¹⁹

At the same time, the power of Jesus' proclamation of the fulfillment of all things warrants our hope in the healing of persons, not only in the end of days, but in the here and now. What form this healing may take is not up to us to prescribe. We do our best to engage in processes that open us to the Holy Spirit's movement among us and trust in God/Christ/Spirit to do the work. It may emerge as a transformation of an entire family or community, a repair of broken relationships, or on a larger scale may take the form of a process of restorative justice. In more intimate settings with individuals who are sick or injured, it may take the form of literal, physical cure—as many believers have attested—and this, too, as in the narratives of Jesus' healing miracles, is a sign of the in-breaking of God's realm on a cosmic as well as an individual or purely personal level. Healing may also appear more subtly than physical cure, for example, as a new attitude toward one's illness or injury or toward one's life and relationships. It may be the catalyst for a personal reconciliation or accomplishing some long delayed "unfinished business." It may take the form of a deepening of the spiritual life of the person, an intensification of prayer, or a sense of felt nearness of God. It may even take the outward form of death itself, as some have quoted Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' phrase: "death as the final stage of growth."²⁰

Can death itself be a form of healing? The psychotherapist Irvin Yalom tells a moving story of a patient "Carlos" who entered a therapy group with a perpetual chip on his shoulder.²¹ Foul-mouthed, misogynistic, and just plain nasty in disposition, this patient routinely alienated his fellow group members and splattered his own internal sense of despair over anyone who attempted to show him kindness. Eventually, a terrifying dream revealed to him that he was "not living right." He began to discover a level of empathy for others that he had never experienced before. Others noticed his personality soften, as the hard, defensive shell of many years yielded to a shared process of humanization. Carlos was diagnosed with cancer during this time and even began a cancer support group. He eventually entered the terminal stage of his illness. Yalom visited him in the hospital and was deeply moved when this patient said to him, even as he lay dying, "Thank you. Thank you for saving my life."

While this story does not invoke Christian theological language or religious practices of healing, we find resonances with many pastoral situations in which a person

is not “cured” or saved from physical death, but nevertheless finds new reconciliation and wholeness with himself, others, and God. Even in the process of dying, a person—as well as his or her loved ones and community members—is not beyond the reach of the Spirit’s healing grace. “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom. 14:7-8).

By the same token, when healing occurs in this life, Christian theology always raises the further question: “For what?” We do not help people to reach physical health or mental and emotional wellbeing merely to feel better, or for some personal goal of self-actualization. Healing from a Christian perspective means being made whole and holy precisely so that we can participate ever more fully in the healing and wholeness of one another and of all creation. We are healed in order to live more fully into our unique gifts and vocations—the ministry of all the baptized and the priesthood of all believers. We are also healed because God desires our joy—in Jesus’ words, “I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). As we experience deep joy (which does not avoid or deny our experiences of sadness, loss, and grief), we are drawn closer in the relational life that God intends, with God and with one another, which is so beautifully embodied in the living symbol of the Trinity.²²

How Do We Preach about Healing?

How, then, do we preach about healing? As the above discussion suggests, perhaps we begin by countering misconceptions about what healing is (wholeness, growth, salvation) and is not (magic, a quick fix, a purely physical cure), who receives healing (not just the “one” who is sick), and also who accomplishes it (not ourselves, but God/Christ/Spirit). We might consider approaching texts like the passage from Acts 10, quoted at the beginning of this article not only as historical accounts of the early church’s faith, but as models for Christian community in our own varied contexts today. How might the witness of the first Christians challenge us to engage in practices of healing in our own time and place and in our own communities of faith? The more complexity we can bring to this dialogue, the more our congregations may be willing to explore what healing actually means to them, and to consider engaging in healing liturgies that might previously have felt superstitious or threatening.

Why Preach Healing at Easter?

For Christians, Easter is perhaps the most appropriate time to preach on faith and healing. The Resurrection is a central symbol—even *the* central symbol—of God’s healing power. Narratives like Jesus’ raising of Jairus’ daughter told in all three of the synoptic Gospels and the raising of Lazarus in John 11, or even the raising of the lame to walk in a number of Gospel stories, not only illustrate the raising to health in this life, but point to a pattern of raising—new life here as prolepsis of the new life in the world to come. In baptism, we die and are raised to new life in the Body of Christ. In the Eucharist, we “receive what we are: the Body of Christ.”²³ In our liturgical practices of healing—prayers, litanies, and blessings, laying on of hands, and anointing—we reaffirm both the salvation-wholeness of our baptisms and the sanctification-wholeness of the Eucharistic fellowship, our continuing growth together in our life in Christ. Do we trust that God will move among us, even as God moved

in ancient times, to bring about healing for us—whether dramatic or subtle, far-reaching or intimate? Do we need concrete “signs and wonders,” or do the intuitions of our hearts and the *agape* love we share when we (if only fleetingly) glimpse true community give us all the “proof” we need? Healing, being raised to new life and wholeness, are real parts of our own experience and are the real pattern of our Gospel faith: good news! Now, it is up to us to proclaim it.

Notes

- 1 Biblical passages are quoted using the *New Revised Standard Version*.
- 2 “Healing.” *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved December 6, 2010, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/healing>.
- 3 Morton Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity: A Classic Study* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995), 152; Morris Maddocks, *The Christian Healing Ministry*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1990), 98-99.
- 4 Pamela Cooper-White, “The Psycho-Spiritual Implications of Illness and Injury,” in *Spiritual and Psychological Aspects of Illness: Dealing with Sickness, Loss, Dying, and Death*, ed. Beverly A. Musgrave and Neil J. McGettigan, pp. 114-23 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010).
- 5 David Smith, *Health and Medicine in the Anglican Tradition* (Chicago: Park Ridge Center/Crossroad, 1986); John J. Cecero, “From Healing to Wholeness: A Psycho-Spiritual Approach,” in *Spiritual and Psychological Aspects of Illness*, op. cit., 3-19.
- 6 John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner’s, 1977).
- 7 Not to be confused with a theological anthropology of oneness as uniformity or lack of complexity as a person—see Pamela Cooper-White, *Braided Selves: Collected Essays on Multiplicity, God, and Persons* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, forthcoming).
- 8 Mark Dyer, Sermon for All Saints, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Washington, DC, 2007. Note: I no longer have my copy of the sermon, and it has been retold in numerous other sermons and essays. The version I present here is as faithful to the original as my memory permits.
- 9 Detailed in Kelsey, 41-82; Maddocks, 30-61.
- 10 Maddocks, 88.
- 11 Ibid., 98.
- 12 Zach Thomas, *Healing Touch: The Church’s Forgotten Language* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).
- 13 Gordon Lathrop, personal communication. For more on anointing, see also Lizette Larson-Miller, *Lex Orandi: The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005).
- 14 Pamela Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom: Use of the Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 155-56, 172-74.
- 15 *Book of Common Prayer*, 1982 (New York: Church Publishing, 1982), 857.
- 16 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 24ff.
- 17 William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle. *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964).
- 18 Sharon Thornton, *Broken Yet Beloved: A Pastoral Theology of the Cross* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 163-4.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New York: Scribner, 1987).
- 21 Irvin Yalom, *Love’s Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989).
- 22 Cooper-White, *Many Voices: Pastoral Psychotherapy in Relational and Theological Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
- 23 A distribution sentence sometimes used at the Eucharist, based on Augustine’s Sermon 272.