

HEALING AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

“THE HEALING COMMUNITY”

Third in a sermon series by James R Blades, Senior Pastor
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The cornerstone of our Christian Faith is the doctrine of The Incarnation. How many of you know what that is, the Incarnation? John spells it out in the first chapter of his Gospel. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” he says. “No one has ever seen God; it is God the only Son who is close to the heart of the Father, who has made him known.”¹

Paul put it this way: “For in Jesus the whole **fullness** of deity dwells bodily.”

That is the doctrine of the Incarnation: that God became a human being, that when we look at Jesus, hear his words and see his works, we are looking into the very heart and motive of God. Now, as we’ve observed for the past two weeks, the heart of Jesus ministry was healing. One of every seven verses of the Gospel narrative is about Jesus healing miracles. Why did Jesus heal? Was it just a proof of his claims to be the Messiah, as so many of history’s theologians assert? No, the evidence is clear: Jesus healed because he was the living presence of God’s compassion over God’s suffering children. “The reign of God is breaking into your midst,” he preached. And the demonstration of that inbreaking was God’s healing intervention in the ills of this world. Jesus’ preaching was about God’s love. Jesus’ healing was God’s love in action!

Now after Jesus’ resurrection and before he ascended to heaven, John tells us that Jesus gave his disciples some very important instructions (John 20:21-22): “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The meaning is clear.

When Jesus walked this earth, Jesus was the very incarnation of God’s healing presence in this world. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he left that same identical role to the Church.

In John’s first letter to the churches, 1John 4:12, he says something very fascinating: “No one has ever seen God . . .” Sound familiar? They are the identical words he uses in his Gospel to describe Jesus’ incarnation that we just read. But now John finishes this declaration in a different way: “but when we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is made evident through us.”

Here’s John’s point: That the same incarnational presence of God that was revealed in Jesus, is released in us when we what? “Love one another.”

James, in our Scripture reading of this morning, paints a more specific picture of the Church as Christ’s healing community.

“Are any among you sick? They should call 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 (that is, heal) the sick and the Lord will raise them up.”

Here James reveals one of the core rituals of the Church which was right up there with Baptism and Communion. When someone was sick, they called on their physicians, yes, and they also called on their elders, the representatives of their faith community, to come in person, anoint them with oil, and pray for their healing. The oil was no magical

¹ John 1:1-8

talisman; it was simply an accompanying symbol of this ritual, just like the bread and cup and baptismal waters are symbols of God's gift. In the ancient world, oil was considered a healing emollient (as when Jesus says the Good Samaritan "poured oil and wine" on the wayfarer's wounds). Oil also represented the Holy Spirit, the healing presence of Christ. Note, too, that it says "call the elders" and not "call *an* elder or *a* pastor." The prayer for healing was to be a communal affair. Why? Because it is in community that God's incarnational love and power become present. "Truly I tell you," said Jesus, "that if two of you **agree** on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."²

That word translated "agree" in the original Greek is the word *sumphoneo*. Recognize it? It is akin to our word *symphony*. When our prayers rise together as a symphony, Christ becomes present in our praying. So the sick is to call the *elders*. This word "call" has some power to it in the original: perhaps the word "summon" is a better word. "Is any among you sick? They should *summon* the elders of the church. You might or might not answer a call. But you'd better answer a summons. "Summon the elders and have them pray over them ..." is the picture of bending over the sick bed. The point being: this is not prayer in absentia but prayer in person. "And the Lord will raise them up." That can mean a number of things. Raise them up from their sick bed. Raise them up out of their despair. Raise them up from their lonely isolation. The point is that God's raising up, God's resurrection power, is released in the communal prayer of faith over the sick. That's the picture this passage paints.

Now here's the question: "Is this a practice that God still calls the Church to, today? Does God's healing power still become present in the prayer of faith and the visitation of the sick and the anointing with oil? Does such a ritual still have efficacy and power in our day of modern medical miracles?"

When my daughter was born 7 weeks early, she had one setback after another. I read this James passage and called the elders of the church to come pray over my daughter's bassinette in the neonatal intensive care unit of Children's Hospital in St. Paul. Together we surrounded her bassinette, anointed her with oil and prayed. I cannot prove what part that prayer played in my daughter's turn to progress, but I can say that there was such power in that prayer circle that several of the nurses on the unit were awed by what they witnessed. Years later, one of those nurses told me that this experience had such an effect on her, that she had decided to go on from nursing to seminary training. Was God's power released in that event? Yes it was.

When I was a pastor in Bellingham, one morning during our prayer sharing time in worship, similar to what we have here, a woman asked for prayer for her quiet and shy husband sitting next to her in the pew. For months, he had been suffering from a condition that blocked the function of all his tear ducts. He was constantly having to use artificial tear drops. None of the physician's prescribed treatments had not worked. I invited several people who were sitting nearby to lay hands on him. At the very moment we applied the oil and started praying, this rough-handed shy old potato farmer broke into tears. Now he was not what you would call a religious man and I'm sure he didn't have a lot of faith or fervor for this healing prayer. But he was healed that morning right before our eyes and, to my knowledge, never suffered the condition again.

² Matthew 18:19-20

Some of you may know that Debbie's first husband died of throat cancer. Paul was not a churchgoing guy. But after his unsuccessful treatment and surgery, Debbie got his permission to call the elders of her church to come to their home to anoint him with oil and pray over him. Debbie says that the presence of Jesus was so powerfully evident in those elders prayer over Paul, that as soon as he got strong enough, he requested to be baptized in front of the whole church as a witness to his newfound faith in Jesus Christ. He was not miraculously healed, but who could say he was not healed in the larger sense?

I could tell half a dozen other stories of the power of Christ released, the love of Christ become present, in such anointing, praying, touching, healing events but I haven't time.

This I will say: I have never seen James' prescription for healing prayer fail to have some healing effect, Christ's work unique in every case, not always the healing of the sickness itself, but always a release of God's mending, embracing, welcoming, and inclusive love.

I submit to you that it is in this attention to the sick, this touching of the ill, this praying over the troubled, this anointing of the fevered head, this embracing of the suffering by the Christ community that Christ's healing presence is encountered, and the church gathered becomes Christ's incarnational presence.

"Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you (plural) may be healed."

Finally, what does confession and forgiveness have to do with healing? Jesus tied the two together. And so does James. To confess is to uncover what is hidden, to bring out into words and expression what is true on the inside. As we shall observe in another sermon in this series a bit later, the first step toward healing is nearly always the disclosure of what is broken. When you are ill and visit a doctor, you start by telling the doctor your symptoms. When you ask for prayer for healing, you start by putting into words your ache or sorrow or disappointment.

How often I have seen it: that it is in the very telling, the very self disclosure, the very uncovering and bringing into the light what pains us, that the healing begins. "Confess your sins," says James, "to one another." The word translated as *sin* is *hamartia* in the original Greek which means to fall short. It could just as easily be translated "shortcomings" or "faults" or "flaws." Disclose yourselves honestly to one another, that's what James is saying, and pray for one another, that you may all, together, be healed.

History tells us that the early church practiced this discipline of mutual disclosure and confession in their small worship groups. In later centuries, the confessional practice warped into a guilt-ridden ritual only to be done in the presence of a priestly "father confessor." But it is clear that the confessors of the original Church community were "each other." Do you have someone or some small group with whom you can uncover your true self, with whom you can tell your brokenness, pain, sickness, sorrow and in turn hear theirs? **It is in this very environment of communal confession and prayer that the Spirit of Christ becomes present to heal.** Which is the whole purpose of Stephen Ministry, by the way. Stephen Ministry is practical training how to be a listening, supporting, loving presence in the lives of those who are suffering from many of the typical ills of life we all sooner or later face. We don't have to face them alone!

We can be to each other *God's love in action!*