

Practicing Our Faith Sermon Series
#5 – Practicing Healing
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I've never told you this before, but I was once on the receiving end of a miraculous, super-natural healing. No, a TV evangelist didn't smack me on my forehead or slay me in the Spirit. I was miraculously healed by a chicken poppyseed casserole. This happened right after our first child was born. We were living several hours away from our family, we had virtually no support system, and we were beyond exhausted. And then a little old lady from the church I was serving as a youth pastor showed up at our apartment door with a steaming hot pan of chicken poppyseed casserole. And the Lord said, "It was very good." It was absolutely the cure we needed for what ailed us at that moment. Does that count as a healing?

For our Lenten sermon series, we've been looking at how to grow in our faith through the ways we practice living it out. We've learned that practicing things like saying yes and no, honoring our bodies, and offering forgiveness help us take the next step on our faith journey. We never expect to master these disciplines, but by practicing them, we can hope to gradually get better at them and honor God in the process.

Today, we are talking about practicing healing. The first challenge we have to overcome is trying to come to a common understanding of what it means to heal, because that concept means different things to different people. For a lot of folks, healing means a physical cure from some malady or illness. That's certainly one aspect of healing, but it in no way defines its totality. What does it mean to heal or to be healed? And does healing have anything to do with our faith?

Early believers thought so. Healing was very much a part of the early Christian understanding of a life of faith. We know that Jesus healed many people during his time on earth, including the 10 lepers we read about earlier. When Jesus sent his disciples out into the neighboring towns, one of their marching orders was to heal every sickness and disease. The early church picked up on that, making rites like anointing the sick with oil and the laying on of hands an integral part of their wholistic ministry. To this day, the Catholic Church has as one of its seven sacraments the anointing with oil for the purpose of healing.

But somewhere along the line, the sacrament of healing lost its cultural value. It was most likely around the time of the Enlightenment, when spiritual reality and material reality were separated, and the role of human knowledge took precedence over the role of faith. You no longer needed to be anointed with oil when you were sick, because new discoveries were providing scientific cures for diseases. That has proliferated down through the centuries, to the point where the concept of healing is relegated almost exclusively to the world of medicine.

Of course, healing does still exist in religion, but only as a caricature. You probably know of folks like Benny Hinn, who've made a fortune off of performing theatrical "cures." You've probably also heard about the dog who was sent to Christian obedience school. On graduation day, he was asked to sit, and he sat. He was asked to speak, and he barked. He was asked to heal, and he raise his paw and said, "Lord Jesus, I command you to remove the squeaky demon from this chew toy." There's a good reason we Christians are skeptical about healing as a spiritual practice.

So, healing is either something done with medicine or something to be made fun of in religion. And yet, healing has so many more layers and dimensions to it than a physical cure. As John Koenig says in the book Practicing Our Faith, “Healing events are daily signs of the divine mercy that is surging through our world and guiding it toward its final perfection. This is true whether they take place by the sharing of chicken soup, the performance of delicate surgery, or the laying on of hands in a service of worship.” All these acts, and many more, are ways of practicing healing.

In our passage, James tells us praying is one of those ways. He says, “Are any among you sick? They should 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.” One of the most effective ways we can practice healing is through intercessory prayer, praying for someone who is sick to be made well (which may be different than being physically cured).

Right after I was diagnosed with MS, a staff member at my seminary came to me and said, “Kory, a group of us have a prayer meeting every Wednesday morning, and we’d like to invite you to attend so that we can lay hands on you and pray for you.” I liked this guy, but I was still coming to terms with my this next chapter in my life and skeptical of what sounded like evangelical revival tactic, so I didn’t go, because that’s not how healing happens. I had just learned I had multiple sclerosis; what good could they do for me?

I have since learned two things about that invitation. First, what he was offering was solidly grounded in scripture. And, second, healing absolutely does happen that way, but maybe not the kind of healing I was looking for. If we think of healing only as a physical cure, then we are limiting our understanding of how God works in our lives, and we’re setting ourselves up with unreachable expectations. If our only form of practicing healing is an intercessory prayer that says, “Lord, take away my grandma’s terminal cancer or else,” then we’re missing the ways God can bring about healing that transcends the physical realm.

Healing, in its most divine form, is not about curing. It’s about restoration. It’s about restoring wholeness to what is broken. That can be a broken bone, or a broken heart, or a broken society. Theologian Paul Tillich said that, “Healing is an element in the work of salvation.” Often, Jesus combined a physical healing with a spiritual one, telling the person who had been physically cured that their sins were forgiven. And remember, James says the prayer of faith will save the sick. Salvation, not curing. So, to practice healing is to practice restoring something to its original, God-ordained state.

Because of this more holistic way of seeing this practice, I believe healing is making a comeback, returning from its banishment to the outskirts of religion to take a central role in the restorative process. I believe, after centuries of thinking religion didn’t have anything to offer in the way of healing, people are coming to see the power of prayer in a different light. When I started in ministry, whenever I was visiting someone in the hospital, I would have to wait until the doctors and nurses and staff were done before I could spend any time with them, and my visits were frequently interrupted for the more important work of attending to the patient’s physical needs. But several times in the past few year, I’ve been visiting with a patient when the doctor has come in the room. I have introduced myself as the person’s pastor, and the doctor has said, “Oh, don’t me interrupt. I’ll wait until you are finished.” The power of prayer is being accepted as part of the healing process for a patient.

So how do we practice this? First, we have to expand our understanding of healing. Trust that God can bring about healing in all situations, even if a physical cure doesn’t take

place. Wounds can be healed and wholeness can happen even as bodies give way to sickness and death. Practice having the eyes to see the healing power of God that goes beyond our limited expectations of a person receiving a super-natural cure.

A second way to practice healing is to trust that your prayers for healing make a difference. It can feel helpless to see a friend or loved one suffer, and sometimes prayer can feel like busy work or last-ditch effort to do something, although we don't always believe it matters. But James tells us the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. When I laid in the hospital bed with my new diagnosis of MS, I could feel the power of people praying for me, and that brought me a sense of peace, that God could work through this curve ball my body had thrown me.

So, who can you pray for today? Who needs healing? Who needs peace, assurance, guidance, a cure? How about praying for our country to be healed from violence and division? We can pray for all of those things, and then trust that God hears those prayers. I believe healing is happening all around us, in some of the most unorthodox and unexpected ways, through whispered words of forgiveness and steaming hot chicken poppy seed casseroles.

I want to close with this story, my most memorable experience of the power of healing. I was once asked to come see a man in a coma so that I could anoint him with oil. Now, you may not know this, but I'm not Catholic, so this was something new to me. Thankfully, I had some oil in my office we use on Ash Wednesday, so I grabbed it and headed to the ICU unit at UK hospital.

The scene when I arrived was tense. The man in question, an athlete in his 40s, had fallen and hit his head and was not expected to survive. The family included a 10-year-old son and the man's ex-wife and his current girlfriend and his parents and his ex-in-laws and his current girlfriend's parents. The mood was chaotic and turbulent and contentious. So I gathered the family in the room, and I anointed the man's head with oil and said a prayer. Then, I invited each family member to anoint his head with oil and speak a word of love to him. And then, completely by the Holy Spirit's leading, I asked if any of the family members would like to be anointed with oil. Almost all of them stepped forward. Instead of doing all the anointing myself, I anointed the first person, then handed them the oil and said, "Now, anoint the person behind you." I watched as the son anoint his mother, the ex-wife, who then turned and anointed the current girlfriend as all the various in-laws looked on. The best way I can described what happened was that air in the room softened. Although the man died the next week, I know healing took place in that room, thanks be to God.