

“Should I Pray for Healing?”

Sermon by the Very Rev'd Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral

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Mark 5:21-43 / July 1, 2018

Is it okay to ask for relief when you are sick or hurting? And what about the whole notion of prayers for healing?

Bob Riegel, longtime canon priest and pastor here, shared a story this week that helps us think about that. (I got his permission to tell it.)

Tuesday, he said, “I was [getting treatment] at the pulmonary rehab unit. As I was ready to leave I saw a man lying flat on the floor. The staff gathered around him and began CPR.

I thought they might break a rib! I stayed out of the way and said a prayer and made the sign of the cross. The guy on the floor,” Bob continues, “suddenly sat up smiling. At first I was stunned

by the power of prayer. But then I learned it was a training exercise for the staff. It was all a *drill*.”

As Bob continued to talk to the staff, the story got better: The poor guy on the floor was a mannequin, a lifeless dummy. He had sat up only because he had been propped up.

Fun story. But what about prayers for healing?

Seriously!

I want to begin to answer that question with a personal note. When people ask me about my family—my mom and dad—I tell them that I lost my parents when I was still a young man. By that I mean, as people often do when they use the word *lost* that they *died*—my dad when he was just 67 and my mom just a few years later.

But there is another sense in which that word *lost* fits. I had, in a different way, for a time, lost them some years earlier.

A decision I made so offended them that they withdrew all affection. Their rejection felt so forceful that it cut off all closeness. They hinted at writing me out of the will. In their fury, they wouldn't come to my wedding.

I grieved their absence.

You can bet that I prayed for healing of that brokenness. Well, there was reconciliation, I'm happy to say, largely sparked by the birth of our son Abram, their first grandchild.

I share all that to remind us what we know in our gut, if we are honest, that our little worlds contain bruised, tender places of estrangement or suffering. And if that's true then I see direct relevance in that truth to how we pray. And how (and if) we ask others to pray for us.

Unfortunately, we get embarrassed by our hardships, as if we must keep secret these wounded places in our lives and relationships. But, as Anne Lamott puts it, tongue in cheek,

“Lots of people do not have rich networks of
hilarious uncles and adorable cousins,
who all live nearby, to help them.”

Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair, Penguin Group US.

Lots of us, in fact, struggle with grief and hurt and
illness. And I don't just mean physical pain.
We bear memories of hurts and even trauma.
We endure broken relationships. We mourn for
people we love. We long for broken friendships to
be restored. We hurt for our own children, as they
struggle with addictions or temptations or the
trauma of assault.

I wish we didn't work so hard to hide the
brokenness. I wish we didn't obsess about
appearing flawless. I wish that we were more
willing to turn humbly to God,
asking for his help and healing.

Our stories from Mark tell us, if we ever doubted,
just how powerfully the Bible's stories connect
with our hard moments and hardships.

We see this in the way Jesus, without flinching, without hesitating, encountered the sorrows and pains of human life.

Watch Jesus as he journeys from place to place, and you see him encountering the broken and bruised along the road. You see his hand stretched out to undo illness and demonic oppression and all sorts of brokenness.

For in Jesus a vast God becomes connected to everyday circumstances. As Tim Keller puts it, “the God of the infinite power” is “also our tender shepherd.” I’d add that God is also a kind healer.

We see that in an especially vivid way when he encounters a woman who’s been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. Mark tells us that this woman had tried everything.

The Talmud, collection of Jewish laws, set out no fewer than eleven different cures for her condition: Like tonics and astringents, some of which may have helped, some of which were mere superstition.

Take this prescription, for example: Carry the ashes of an ostrich egg in a linen bag in summer, and a cotton bag in winter.

Or carry a barley corn found in the dung of a white donkey. That was supposed to do it.

No wonder Luke, the Gospel writer and physician, in his account, includes the comment that “no one was able to heal her.”

But there’s more to the hard story: The description of her condition was more than a clinical diagnosis. She experienced not just physical suffering, but also social isolation.

Her chronic bleeding would have made her virtually outcast. According to the Jewish law, she was ceremonially unclean, so she would defile anyone with whom she came into contact.

That uncleanness explains the stealth with which she approached Jesus, and her trembling when caught: She was defiling a rabbi without his knowing it. But she had gone to every doctor and she was desperate.

So she reaches out, her extended hand itself a prayer, thinking that if she could only touch Jesus' robe, she would be fine.

And what a dramatic moment. "Immediately" her hemorrhage stopped. Jesus, surrounded by milling crowds, halts. Immediately.

He doesn't chide her for her boldness. Instead, he commends her for her faith.

For sometimes we need to stretch out our hand, and say, "God, I need a new connection with you." Or "Christ, I need an experience of your presence." Or "please bring your healing help."

For our creative God is at work doing amazing things. Even, sometimes, healing what is broken or sick.

That's what has been happening here in this place.

As we open our lives to this loving Christ, we continue to witness miracles that have to do with broken marriages or

broken spirits or broken bodies.

Should I pray for healing?

I think the answer is that sometimes the important thing is that we ask at all. That we do turn to God for healing, or *for any need*.

For prayer connects us to God where we live.

Asking is a declaration of dependence on God.

That act of turning to God is even more important than if we get the answer we most want.

That prayer is a declaration of dependence on God explains in part why we have a second healing story in Mark in today's reading.

It's for or those of us who don't self-identify as needy and broken, not normally, anyway.

For we also meet Jairus, who, unlike the woman, is not, based on his station in life, a needy person.

He was a leader of the synagogue.

We might say a member of the vestry.

He was used to people giving him respect.

You wouldn't expect someone of his breeding and refinement to stoop to ask for help from this itinerant miracle worker.

But not only is his daughter sick, She is sick to death. *Literally*. And he, too, cries out. He falls at Jesus' feet and *begs*, Mark tells us. He's not immune from suffering and need either.

You're not. I'm not. So we ask.

I discovered this early in ministry. When I was in seminary at Princeton Theological Seminary, I did my field education assignment at a Methodist church in urban Philadelphia, an hour or so away.

Bill Bouton, the pastor there, and my mentor and supervisor, used to say he would take ministering in an urban area over a parish in the suburbs any day. For the affluent, he found, are better at covering over their hurts and broken places. In that lower-middle-class section where our church perched, people couldn't hide behind

appearances. In their financial straits, their kids vulnerable to the wrong crowd, their needs were too obvious. That made them open to help.

Friends, can we please drop some of our pretenses? Maintaining a front distances us from one another. And until we lower our defenses our prayer life will be lukewarm or lifeless.

But admit your need, *then* you turn naturally, urgently, asking for help.

Like we heard in today's section from Psalm 30:

“O Lord, my God I cried out to you and you restored me to health.”

I want to see us place a new accent on healing prayer, on fervent prayer for healing.

Healing for ailments but also emotional hurts.

We have healing prayer now at every service here

this summer. And as you know, we have a

Thursday Eucharist.

That service always includes healing prayer—
anointing with oil and laying on of hands, all part
of our wonderful prayer book tradition.

There was a time when I might do that service and
no one would come up to ask for prayer.
But in the last couple of years, something has
changed. Something feels very different.
I never officiate at that service now without
praying for *at least* a half-dozen people.

I love Trinity Cathedral because
people find hope and healing, here,
because Christ is here and active. I want to see us
talking more about what God is doing in our
midst. And talking *to* God –
about what he's waiting to do.

Please, don't hang back from the healing, life-
giving presence of Jesus wherever you are,
whatever your need.