



St. Luke – October 18, 2009

“A Healing People”

A homily preached by the Rev'd James J. Popham

Have you ever heard a profession draped in the mantle of Godliness more emphatically than physicians in this morning's excerpts from Sirach? “The skill of physicians makes them distinguished, and in the presence of the great they are admired.” You could search every chapter and verse of the Bible and never find anything that complimentary about lawyers or priests.

Now I tried to be a doctor. I was doing fine my first year in university, A's and B's in critical subjects like calculus and chemistry. But in my second year, my proverbial sophomore slump intersected with biology lab, and to this day I would swear that starfish have only one part – the star. Well, someone had to set the bottom of the curve in biology lab. So much for my career in medicine.

But I do not for a minute begrudge doctors or others in the medical profession the respect they deserve. Few among us would challenge Sirach's notion that medical professionals were created by God and blessed by God with gifts that enable them to heal the sick.

But as Jesus was God's great instrument of healing, we all are called to be healers. We are a healing people. Healing is intertwined deeply in the fabric of our heritage and tradition as Christians. God sent Jesus to heal the relationship between God and humanity. This is what Jesus announces in Luke's gospel this morning. And Jesus in story after story in the Gospels healed and healed and healed again. No wonder the early Christians were in large part a healing movement. They were propelled to heal as they were healed. And now we are compelled to continue in the great healing work of God.

How do we do that? How do we tap into the torrent of healing grace that flows from God? The answer to these questions, like the concept of healing in scripture and in the Christian tradition, is in many ways as challenging and perplexing as it is powerful and hopeful.

Sirach says “pray to the Lord and [God] will heal you.” And if we continued to read on in Luke as it describes Jesus' mission in Galilee, we would hear a number of stories about Jesus healing the blind, the lame, the sick, even the possessed – those who in our day are more likely to be diagnosed as suffering mental illness. And there are those who believe that God can and does intervene to cure and to heal just as Jesus did in Galilee. Some of us may even know cases where someone hopelessly ill has recovered, has been healed; but where modern medicine can offer no explanation. Those cases are few and far between. Are we then left to wonder why a few are cured in some inexplicable or “miraculous” fashion, while so many more are left afflicted and suffering?

But we continue to pray. Now scientific evidence that prayer is a positive force in healing is promising, but inconclusive. But, perhaps, the miracle resides in the fact that even in a postmodern world skeptical of all things religious, the question is being asked. And that time and energy and resources are being devoted to scientific inquiry into the efficacy of prayer.

And one might be just as skeptical of the skepticism about prayer. After all, if one is willing to concede that God created the universe, it hardly seems a stretch to concede to God the power to answer prayer. And if we are to understand from the latest theories of quantum physics that everything is interconnected, that unseen dimensions of reality surround us, that our brains emit measurable waves, then again, who is anyone to say that the energy of our prayers could have no effect.

Regardless, when we pray for the sick or afflicted we are drawn into the flow of God's healing energy. We become the conduits of God's grace. We become instruments of God's healing work in the world. That alone is reason to pray. Wisely, therefore, we might spend more time praying than wondering how prayer works.

And in our Anglican tradition, [one we will observe in a few moments,] we do not discount the power of prayer, and the power of sacrament. In our prayers of the people, we invariably pray for those who are ill and those who care for them. When we anoint the sick, we see that outward and visible sign as accompanied by the inward and invisible – but often palpable – grace of God

We know we are operating in the realm of miracles. Consider the miracle of our bodies. They are hard-wired to heal. Our cuts and bruises heal. Our broken bones mend. Our white cells attack infection. Even damaged livers can regenerate. As one of my favorite television angels said last week, “Whenever I come across someone who claims not to believe in God, I point to the human body.” And might we rightly describe as “miraculous” the ability of medical science to develop an effective vaccine against H1N1 flu in a matter of months? As Sirach observes: “The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them.” That sounds like the Old Testament version of get your flu shots. And it gives first credit to God. But, perhaps, the real miracle is the enormous effort and expertise of medical science that produced a vaccine so quickly.

No less miraculous is the ingenuity of the health care system to confront the spread of H1N1 with drive-through vaccinations and tent city intensive care units. And how many miracles did it take to develop polio vaccine, or machines that can provide kidney function, or immunosuppressant that permit organ transplants, or an ever expanding array of antibiotics that seem to stay just ahead of mutating bacterial scourges.

We are called to join in this always miraculous work of healing. We are called to join Jesus in mending humanities ills. We must be the open conduits of God's healing grace. A grace that will enable us and empower us to lend whatever aid and comfort we can to the sick and afflicted. We need not be a doctor. We need not be a nurse. We need not be a pharmacist. We need not be a therapist. We might be a cook, a driver, a companion, or even a correspondent from afar. However we reach out, our touch will be God's touch. Our work will be God's work. Remember what we so often pray. Glory to God whose power working in us – working in us – can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Amen.