

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

SUMMER 2010 'ASK THE PASTOR SERIES'

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

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Luke 4:38-44

"Healing"

Two questions to *Ask The Pastor* about "Faith Healing" - one lists it as a topic; the other asks, in part, "We know that Jesus healed the sick, but this was also meant to demonstrate his power to heal the spirit. What does the Bible say to us today about physical 'faith healing'?"

### 1) Jesus and the Apostles Healed

Jesus was known as a healer; occasionally he healed every sick person brought to him, more often individuals who asked him for healing for themselves or a family member. In those cases Jesus usually commended the faith of the sick person, their friends or their family. The Apostles also healed: the Twelve were sent out by Jesus with "authority to heal every disease;" after Pentecost Peter and John healed a crippled beggar at the Temple gate "by faith in the name of Jesus." Philip, one of the Seven, astonished people with the "signs and wonders" he performed; Paul "saw a cripple who had faith to be healed and called him to 'stand up.'"

All these healings, as in the Old Testament examples from the time of Elijah and Elisha, not only conveyed God's compassion to sick people, but acted as "signs" that pointed to the presence and power of God in the healer, and validated his message. Healings, like other miracles, were attestations and vindications. As we move later in the New Testament, we find several other emphases: one, that healing is regarded as a *spiritual* (or

'charismatic') gift that some people have; and two, that *healing ministry is part of the ongoing life of the church* - as in James' instruction to sick people to call for the elders to pray and anoint them. Finally there is the reminder that *full healing still lies ahead, in the Age to Come*. All these perspectives add up to a belief that "healing is a sign of the kingdom of God."

So healing points toward, illustrates, gives a taste of, contributes to, the wholeness, the *shalom* of God, the salvation, that Jesus came to bring. This can be anticipated *now in part*, but will only be revealed and enjoyed fully in the future. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> C., we are told it was more common to speak of "*spiritual healing*." The work of the Holy Spirit in the Church was now chiefly directed at "healing of sins;" sickness was increasingly seen as a "spiritual weakness;" confession and repentance became a central part of healing ministry.

### 2) Healing in History

Throughout 2000 years of Christian history, there are many anecdotal reports of miraculous physical healings, often associated with pilgrimages to certain shrines, with relics, with the ministries of specially blessed people ("the Saints"). Anointing the sick was still practiced, and prayers for the sick were part of all church liturgies. There were church rituals for exorcism.

But the great modern revival of interest in physical “faith healing” parallels the 20<sup>th</sup> C. emergence of the Pentecostal movement. Its start is usually dated to the Azusa Street revivals in Los Angeles in 1906; it grew through the ministries of charismatic leaders who proclaimed attestation by “signs and wonders” – people whose names you would recognize: Smith Wigglesworth, Aimee Semple McPherson; later Oral Roberts, then Kenneth Copeland, Pat Robertson, Benny Hin. Whole Pentecostal denominations and networks of churches have emerged, from the Assemblies of God to the Vineyard Churches, and they represent the fastest growing segment of Christianity in America and in the world.

Every Pentecostal believes that God heals physically and miraculously today, and every Pentecostal pastor and other leaders believes he or she has a “healing ministry.” Of course there are many people, including other Christians, who are skeptical about these claims. Some take a hard line in opposition: American Fundamentalists and many Evangelicals – Baptists for example – are strongly opposed to all claims of “charismatic gifts.” People in our Reformed-Presbyterian-Congregational traditions have often argued that these “sign-gifts” disappeared after their “attestation” role in the 1<sup>st</sup> C. Apostolic age; today, they argue, we have the New Testament!

### 3) *Healing Today*

So does anyone get healed today? If so, who, how, and by what means? I would argue that there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that healings would end in the 1<sup>st</sup> C. I would argue that you cannot limit God and tell him what he may or may not do at a given time! I would argue that there are too many reports of healing to ignore, or to suggest that they all represent quackery or psychological suggestion or placebo effect. I

would argue that we all implicitly believe that God can heal; that the first thing we all do when someone is sick is pray for them, and place them on our church prayer list. Every church I know prays for their sick every week. We all believe in God’s healing!

But who gets healed and how? By far the majority of healings occur through the *common grace of God* expressed in the development of modern medicine. For all the skepticism and fear of medicine among Christians, most of us are very glad to have experienced internists diagnose our illnesses, effective antibiotics treat our infections, knowledgeable specialists test our hearts, our lungs, our digestive tracts; skilled surgeons remove our tumors. Yes, we fear ending our days in an ICU on a ventilator; yes we are frustrated by the “health care system,” yes we hate the side-effects of many of our medications. But we are happy to be alive now and not 100 or 200 years ago.

But what about God “intervening” with “miraculous” healing? Does it happen? Yes. Very often? No. But I suspect every one of us knows of a very premature baby who has flourished, a cancer patient who has had an amazing remission, a person in a long and deep coma who has returned to full life – moments when the physicians and the family all agree “this was a miracle.” We witness – to use one of Craig Malbon’s favorite expressions in medical situations – “*the breaking-in of God*”- and everything changes.

Does this only happen to people who have great faith? Or whose family have great faith? Or for whom a critical amount of prayer is offered? Not that I can detect. Does it require the presence or action of someone with “the gift of healing”? Not that I am aware. So is there anything we can do to persuade God to heal us or someone we love? I don’t think so. Oh, we can pray, we

should pray, we must pray! But we cannot bribe God with prayer, we cannot promise what we will do for God if he heals us, we cannot parade our faith before God and say "you owe me this healing." God's grace does not work that way.

So those of us who believe that healing is possible also open ourselves to dangers and temptations that don't affect people who are sure God never heals! We run a risk to our faith - if God does not heal, despite all our prayers, will we lose our faith? Cease to trust him? Get angry and turn our backs on him? Spend the rest of our days blaming him? I have seen all those things happen - and sadly, more often than I have seen miraculous healings. If healings are rare, as I suspect, then damage to faith is a more likely possibility for people who are naive about God, about this world, and about the randomness of suffering. Be careful what you pray for! If you cannot say and mean "*Lord, this is what I want. But Lord, your will be done and not mine,*" then don't pray for healing.

And do not get angry with God. We cannot claim to be "more moral than God" - that is a very dangerous place to be! We have to trust his wisdom, his goodness, and what we know of him as a person. We cannot second-guess his every move, be forever asking "*why?*" and still claim to trust him! In the face of sickness, or any form of suffering, we have to learn to *trust the God we have learned to know through his Son Jesus Christ*, even when we don't understand his actions!

There are other dangers today. One is to slide into quackery, delusion, self-diagnosis and self-medication. Look in your local pharmacy and see how many herbal supplements, additives, minerals, complexes, mega-dose vitamins we are ingesting every year. And that's not even considering our over-use of prescription drugs. One visit

after another to one doctor after another, and soon we are taking 10 pills a day to treat our different symptoms. Our medicine cabinets are over-flowing - and that is a real danger, because any drug counselor or enforcement agent will tell you that for most young people, the road to street drugs runs right through their parents' medicine cabinet. If you have left-over opiate pain-killers from your surgery, throw them out (tho' not down the toilet into the water-supply, please)! With pharmaceutical companies pitching their drugs directly to us on TV and in magazines, and giving billions of samples to our primary care physicians, no wonder as Americans we over-medicate ourselves to a degree that others find astonishing!

What, you may ask, has all this to do with faith, with healing, with God? Not much! We ought to pray more, and medicate less. Does God heal physically? - yes, but not nearly as often as we would like. Does he heal in other ways? Yes, and much more often. We ought to pray more, and more openly, for people with *mental illnesses*, and get rid of the social stigma that still surrounds *eg. depression*. The healing of minds, the healing of memories, the healing of wounds and of anger, the gifts of forgiveness and a softened heart, reconciliation between estranged people - all these and more I see month after month. Rewards for outstanding faith? Not usually. But sometimes clear answers to prayer, and always signs of undeserved grace.

So let us pray for one another; pray for forgiveness, pray for spiritual healing, pray for wholeness, pray for salvation. And trust God to do what he knows you and I need most. Learn to trust God when we cannot figure out what he is doing! Trust God even when we know we will probably never know "*why*" in this life or the next. But we do know Jesus Christ.

Trust God because he knows you, he knows me, and he sent his Son to die for you and for me so that we could experience wholeness, receive salvation; could know that he walks with us through all our sufferings even when he does not heal us; could know that one day we will enter the Age when all tears are dried, and there is no more suffering or crying or pain, because the old order of things has passed away...

Let us pray...