Book 8

Sunday September 9, 1979

"HOW PRAYER RELATES TO HEALTH AND HEALING" John 5:1-9, 9:1-7

Last week I noted that people have more questions about prayer than almost anything else related to the Christian faith, and we discussed some of the questions. In the sermon, I pointed out that prayer is not telling God what to do. God already knows. Prayer is not for the purpose of changing God, but to change us. God's love and power continually surround us and uphold us. Furthermore, God is not the kind of God who only finally gives us what we need when we are worn out from the continual asking or when we have worn God out with our asking. Our praying, on the other hand, can have the effect of opening us more to receive what God wants to give.

Prayer then is the opening of our whole selves to the loving presence of God. Let's look now at how prayer in this sense relates to health and healing.

To understand the relationship of prayer to health and healing, it is first necessary to remind ourselves of how the Christian faith regards sickness and disease.

To begin, note that Jesus Christ did not teach that illness or disease is a kind of direct punishment from God, although there were people in his time who believed that illness or disease was a punishment sent by God and some people still believe that today.

In one of the stories read earlier from the Gospel of John, the disciples one day asked Jesus about a man who had been born blind. "Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him." And Jesus healed the man.

At the same time, Jesus also knew as we know, that illness or disease may be the result of our own bad habits or our wrong choices. For example, we now know that cigarette smoking can and often does lead to lung cancer. Thus if we persist in the habit, we shouldn't be surprised if one day we get lung cancer. Similarly, if I am a careless and reckless driver, my chances for having an accident which may cripple me or kill me and perhaps kill or cripple others, are increased.

But then I shouldn't blame God for causing the accident. Or if a member of my family is hurt or killed by a careless driver, I can't believe that God sent that driver to hurt a member of my family as punishment.

In spite of the teachings of Jesus and his healing ministry, there are still people who often regard sickness as a punishment sent by God. Furthermore, there have been periods in the history of the church, when the Church understood illness or disease as a form of punishment sent by God. This attitude toward illness became prevalent particularly in the 7th and 8th centuries.

As a result, the church for a time even discouraged prayers for healing and in the 12th century discouraged attempts on the part of the secular medical world to find and practice cures for disease and illness. After all, the theologians reasoned, since illness or disease is punishment sent by God, God will end it when God wills. We human beings shouldn't try to intervene. Thus such practices as human dissection were forbidden and in 1566, the Roman Catholic Church decreed that physicians had to force sick persons to confess their sins to a priest; otherwise they had to abstain from visiting and treating patients. This was quite different from the New Testament and the early church's emphasis on God's will that we human beings be as healthy and whole as possible. It was also quite the opposite of the loving care which Jesus exhibited towards persons who were ill or crippled in any way.

In fact, Jesus demonstrated more interest in the physical and mental health of men and women than any other religious leader in history. Although his ministry also consisted of preaching and teaching, his healing ministry was so important that almost one fifth of the gospel stories are devoted to his healing of persons. The healing ministry of Jesus was a practical application of his teaching, for what better way is there to show God's love than to cure physical and emotional ills. Jesus believed and taught that God desires good health for us all. It is never God's will that we be sick in any way.

Fortunately, in spite of the fact that offical church doctrine has often varied away from Jesus' teaching and practice, there has always remained in the church, although sometimes only in small corners, an emphasis on health and healing. At times, movements like Christian Science have come into being to remind the church that it has a healing ministry.

Fortunately too, scientific medicine, particularly in the western world, has been at work eradicating some of humankind's most dangerous diseases. Many other diseases are being controlled and damages and disabilities are often repaired. We have also seen an extra-ordinary increase in the understanding of the workings of the human body so that it is now possible to perform intricate surgergy inconceivable a few decades ago.

At the same time one of the ways in which parts of the Christian Church recovered its healing ministry has been in the founding of hospitals, clinics and schools all over the world in order to help alleviate human distress.

And even more recently we are seeing again the coming together in a new relationship secular scientific medicine with all of its technology and the Christian faith with its important spiritual dimension. This relationship is especially needed in today's world so that we remember that the human being is much more than merely a complicated physical mechanism.

There was a time in the not too distant past when medicine seemed to have forgotten, or at least de-emphasized the close connection between our mental, spiritual and physical dimensions, and yet deep down we always knew it was there. Even our every day language reveals the close relationship between the body and the soul. A person says, "I can't stomach it." Or, "He's a pain in the neck." "It took my breath away." "I was scared stiff." All these statements describe physical symptoms of an internal emotional state.

"Butterflies in one's stomach," "getting cold feet," both suggest nervousness. Changes in blood pressure, glandular secretions, and a heartbeat rate are all ways of documenting changes in emotional well-being.

Now we know more and more that the body's defenses against disease are also directly affected by emotions. The secretion of stress hormones can retard the creation of antibodies needed to fight off disease. More and more today we are discovering how much mental attitudes of a person have to do with the course of a disease or illness. According to the latest information I've been reading, there is now good reason to believe that a person's state of mind can affect the course of all pathological processes that involve immunological reactions. And mental processes can affect the course of physiological processes as seemingly simple as the digestion of food.

Another amazing hypothesis arising from recent studies now indicates that chemical changes which control children's growth can be altered drastically by conflict in the home so that an apparently dwarfed child, when removed from the charged atmosphere, has been known to grow five to ten inches in one year!

Digestive problems, cardiovascular ailments, and numerous other problems indicate various ways of responding to emotional problems. Insominia, headaches, and tumors can be signals warning us to pay attention to our emotional strains.

In the area of health and healing, in addition to stress and other emotional problems, we also need to remember that wherever we are and whatever we do, we cannot avoid being exposed to a multiplicity of physio-chemical and biological agents of disease. We survive because we are endowed with biological and psychological mechanisms that enable us to respond adaptively to an immense diversity of challenges. This adaptive response can be so effective that most challenges do not result in disease. And if disease occurs, the adaptive response commonly brings about recovery without the need of medical intervention. We are being healed all the time and many times without even being aware of it. Ancient physicians used to call this built-in healing response, "the healing power of nature."

Actually, we are so constructed that the outcome of meeting a challenge is likely to be a lasting change that makes the organism better adapted to future challenges. For example, the development of scar tissue makes the scarred part of the body better able to resist the insult that caused the scarring. Recovery from a given infectious disease is usually accompanied by persistent cellular changes that produce a lasting immunity to that particular infection.

3. Much of our recovery from various diseases depends upon the mobilization of mechanisms which already exist within us for resisting and overcoming disease. Good medical care, the right diet, relieving stress, prayer, living in a loving community, all these can be of help in this mobilization. We all have healing powers within us ready to go to work.

Quote from Peck 238 ff.

Recent experiments with placebos demonstrate how powerful these healing forces are that reside within us and the use of placebos also demonstrates the inter-relationship of mind and body. The word, "placebo" comes from the Latin verb meaning, "I shall please."

A placebo in the classical sense then is an imitation medicine--generally an innocuous milk-sugar pill dressed up like an authentic one. Placebos have sometimes had as much positive effect as real medicine. They have been found to act as authentic therapeutic agents for altering body chemistry and for helping to mobilize the body's defenses in combating disorder or disease.

The physician can himself or herself be a placebo. One man wrote about a very famous doctor, "The instant he entered the sick room, the patient felt better. The art of healing seemed to surround his physical body like an aura. It was often not his treatment, but his presence that cured." Francis Peabody's famous remark, "The secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient," is another way of stating that there can be a kind of miraculous moment when the very presence of the doctor or healer is the most effective part of the treatment.

All of this is to say that we human beings carry within us remarkable healing powers. The human body is often its own best drug store.

Norman Cousins tells about an opportunity he had to observe African witch-doctor medicine at first hand in jungle country. He was having dinner one evening with Dr. Albert Schweitzer at the Schweitzer hospital. Cousins made the remark that local people were lucky to have access to the Schweitzer clinic instead of having to depend on witch-doctor supernaturalism. Dr. Schweitzer asked Cousins how much he knew about witch-doctors and Cousins admitted he knew very little. The next day, Dr. Schweitzer took Mr. Cousins to a nearby jungle clearing where he introduced him to an elderly witch-doctor. After a respectful exchange of greetings, Dr. Schweitzer suggested that his American friend be allowed to observe African medicine.

For the next two hours, Cousins and Schweitzer stood off to one side and watched the witch-doctor at work. With some patients, the witch-doctor merely put herbs in a brown bag and instructed the ill person in their use.

With other patients, he gave no herbs but filled the air with incantations. A third category of patients he merely spoke to in a subdued voice and pointed to Dr. Schweitzer.

Later Dr. Schweitzer explained what had happened. The people who had assorted complaints that the witch-doctor was able to diagnose readily were given special herbs to make brews. Dr. Schweitzer guessed that most of those patients would improve very rapidly since they had only functional, rather than organic, disturbances. The second group had psychogenic ailments that were being treated with African pyschotherapy. The third group had more substantial physical problems, such as massive hernias, or extra-uterine pregnancies or dislocated shoulders or tumorous conditions. Many of these problems required surgery and the witch-doctor was re-directing these patients to Dr. Schweitzer himself. Schweitzer went on to say that some of his steadiest customers were referred to him by witch doctors.

Schweitzer pointed out that the witch-doctor often succeeds for the same reason that all medical help succeeds. Each patient carries his or her own doctor inside. Patients often come, not knowing that truth. The healers are at their best when they give the doctor who resides with in each patient a chance to work. Guilt can impede their process!

Now what does all this have to do with prayer? Since prayer can best be described as being open as much as possible to the loving presence and power of God, it follows that prayer in relation to health and healing can have a two-fold effect. On one level, prayer can change us so that our own mental state is that which lets the healing powers already within us do their best work, and on an even deeper level, being open to the loving presence of God can even increase the healing powers we already possess. God wants us to be whole.

Furthermore, a regular prayer life can bring a harmony and peace and power to our lives that we can get in no other way, and this in itself contributes to health and healing.

In the New Testament accounts, when people met Jesus Christ in person, the healing powers already within them were magnified. And it can be the same for us today. Amen.