Sunday, November 17, 1996
TIMELESS HEALING
James 5:14-16; John 5:1-9, 9:1-7

"Timeless Healing" is the name of a book by Dr. Herbert Benson, an Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. The subtitle is "The Power and Biology of Belief." In the book, Dr. Benson explores the intersection between objective science and the mystifying power of the human spirit. He demonstrates how affirming beliefs, particularly belief in a higher power, make a critical contribution to our physical and mental health. Dr. Benson maintains that as human beings, we are "wired for God."

He is convinced that we are genetically encoded with a need for and nourishment from faith. His research shows that when people call upon faith, they activate neurologic pathways for self-healing. This capacity for self-healing is built into our systems by our Creator. We are created with built-in healing powers.

For those of us who call ourselves Christians, Dr. Benson's discoveries are nothing new. At the same time, I'm delighted that his research underscores the power of faith, the power of prayer, and the power of giving of one's self and one's money in health and healing. Jesus taught that prayer is not about telling God what to do. God already knows. Or as you have heard me say many times before, prayer is not for the purpose of changing God; its purpose is to change us. And this is precisely what Dr. Benson discovered. Our prayers for ourselves and for others can open us to receive what God already wants to give.

As many of you know, it is our practice to begin each weekly staff meeting on Tuesday afternoons with a time of intercessory prayer. When individuals fill out one of the prayer request forms in the pews, our staff remembers them in our prayers. Additionally, the church's prayer group, which meets each Monday evening, prays for those who have requested it. We also have a prayer chain in the congregation that is frequently activated by telephone and mail, so individuals can pray in their homes for those in need.

This is nothing new for Christians. In the letter of James in the New Testament, the writer reminds the early church of the importance of prayer in healing:

"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. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you will be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

The early church, described in the New Testament as the "body of Christ," was continuing what Jesus had done — healing the sick whenever possible.

I mention this today because, starting next month, we are going to begin holding a once-a-month worship service with a focus on healing. This worship service of healing and Holy Communion will be held on the first Wednesday evening of each month at 7:00 p.m. in the chapel. It is a natural extension of what we have been doing all along in our staff intercessory prayers, the Monday night prayer group, and the prayer chain. Furthermore, each worship service held here — Saturday evening and Sunday mornings — contains elements of healing.

That's why I frequently say that one of our goals in worship is for you to feel better in every way when you leave than when you came in.

In the New Testament, the word salvation comes from a Greek word meaning to be made whole, to be healthy — mentally, physically, and spiritually — including being in the right relationship with God and others.

What Jesus knew and taught, and what researchers like Dr. Benson are rediscovering, is that all forms of healing are intimately connected. For example, broken relationships between people can lead to other forms of sickness. Conversely, the healing of broken relationships through forgiveness can have a powerful positive effect on our mental and physical health.

Let's examine more closely the relationship between our Christian faith and the healing process.

First, note that Jesus did not teach that illness or disease is a direct form of punishment from God, although there were people in his time — and there are people today — who believe that illness or disease is a punishment from God.

In one of the stories from the Gospel of John, the disciples asked Jesus about a man born blind: "Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" They assumed a connection between disability and sinfulness. 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 even more today, that illness or disease can result from our own bad habits or wrong choices. We know smoking is extremely detrimental to health. If you persist in the habit, you shouldn't be surprised by the health problems it can cause. If I neglect other good health practices — like proper exercise, eating the right foods, avoiding excess alcohol, getting enough rest, or managing stress — my health will be impaired. But I shouldn't blame God for the consequences.

Some people do not want to be healed, and Jesus knew this. One day he met a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years and asked him, "Do you want to be made well?" It wasn't an idle question. Some people use their illness to evade responsibility or to obtain sympathy, making illness a refuge.

The important point for us is that Jesus demonstrated more interest in the physical, mental, and spiritual health of men and women than any other religious teacher in history. His ministry consisted not only of preaching and teaching, but also of healing individuals. His healing ministry was a practical application of his teaching. What better way to show God's love than to offer healing? Jesus taught and believed that God desires good health for all of us. It is never God's will that we be sick in any way.

The church, as the body of Christ, has also been instrumental in emphasizing the relationship between spiritual and physical health and the power of prayer in healing. In history, the church has often taken the lead in other forms of healing. Many of the early hospitals in this country and worldwide were started by Christian groups.

The Christian church has also sent medical missionaries around the globe, and as Christians, we affirm God's gifts of the medical and psychotherapeutic professions.

As Christians, we also support the advances in public health. For example, until the 20th century, a quarter of children died before their first birthday, and the average life expectancy was 30 years. In 1840, English gentry with better sanitation lived on average to 43, while laborers typically died at 23.

With the sanitation movement came the realization that disease was traceable to specific sources, not random humors or divine will. Improved public health measures — such as clean water, sanitation, and healthcare — dramatically reduced the impact of diseases like cholera and typhoid fever.

Scientific advancements also helped. The discovery of bacteria, such as the causes of anthrax, tuberculosis, and cholera, shifted our understanding of disease.

Yet with these medical advances came a downside. Modern medicine came to expect that all healing could be achieved with medications, leading to less focus on the spiritual side of our nature. Fortunately, we are regaining balance, recognizing the unity of the spiritual and the physical.

In our everyday language, phrases like “I can’t stomach it” or “He’s a pain in the neck” remind us of the connection between emotional and physical health. Digestive problems, headaches, and insomnia can all be physical responses to emotional issues.

In addition to medications and advanced procedures, our Christian faith reminds us that much of our healing depends on the forces within us for resisting and overcoming disease. We all possess healing powers within us, ready to go to work. This is what Dr. Benson calls “remembered wellness.”

Religious faith, including prayer and rituals like the healing services we will hold on the first Wednesday of each month, plays a crucial role in healing. For example, in 1995, Dr. Thomas E. Oxman and his colleagues at Dartmouth Medical School reported that heart disease patients over 55 who received solace from their religious beliefs were three times more likely to survive than those who did not.

Dr. Benson’s book also reports that those with strong religious beliefs are less likely to be depressed and have better overall health. He notes that religious commitment is consistently associated with better health outcomes.

One quote from Dr. Benson stands out: “Religious people consistently report greater life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, well-being, altruism, and self-esteem than non-religious people.” Faith contributes to health, happiness, and contentment. With all these benefits, why would anyone stay away from church?

Incidentally, Dr. Benson’s research also revealed that helping others through volunteer work and giving regularly — such as to the church — enhances overall well-being and health.

God’s will for us is good health. A large part of the church’s ministry, following in the footsteps of Jesus, is promoting healing — the healing of relationships, the healing of body and mind, and the healing of society. We do this primarily through worship, prayer, and caring for each other in loving ways. Amen.