Sunday November 17, 1996

TIMELESS HEALING James 5:14-16, John 5:1-9, 9:1-7

"TIMELESS HEALING" is the name of a new 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 of one's money in health and healing. Jesus taught that prayer is not 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 praying for ourselves and for others can have

the effect of opening us more to receive what God wants to give.

As many of you already know, it is the practice for our church staff 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 that are in the pews, our staff then remembers those individuals in our prayers. In addition, the church prayer group which meets each Monday evening prays for those who have requested it. We also have a prayer chain in the congregation which is frequently activated by telephone and mail so that these individuals can pray in their homes for those who have requested it.

This is nothing startling or new for Christians. In

the letter of James in the New Testament of the Bible, 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 which the New Testament describes as the "body of Christ" was continuing what Jesus had done. He healed the sick whenever possible.

I mention all of this today in this sermon because in December, next month, we are going to begin holding a once-a- month worship service which will have as its main focus, healing. This worship service of healing and Holy Communion will be held the first Wednesday evening of each month at 7:00 p.m. in the chapel. It is a natural extension of what we have already been doing all along in our staff intercessory prayers, the Monday night prayer group and the prayer chain. Furthermore each worship service held here, the one on Saturday evening, and those on Sunday mornings have the elements of healing in them. That's why I so frequently say that one goal of our worship services is that you will 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 which means to be made whole, to be healthy mentally, physically and spiritually which includes being in the right relationship with God and with others.

What Jesus knew and taught and what researchers such as 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 in our mental and physical health.

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

Note first that Jesus did not teach that illness or disease is a direct form of punishment from God, although there were people in his time who believed that it was just as there are people today who believe that illness or disease is a punishment from God.

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?" They were assuming 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 so today that illness or disease can be the result of our own bad habits or wrong choices. It's well known today that smoking is extremely detrimental to your health. Thus 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, do not properly exercise, or consistently eat the wrong foods, drink too much alcohol, or do not get enough rest, or do not learn to deal with the stress that is a part of life, my health will be impaired. But in all of these things, I shouldn't blame God for the consequences.

There's also the fact that some people do not want to be healed. Jesus knew this. One day when he met a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years, he asked him, "Do you want to be made well?" It wasn't an idle question. There

are those who use their illness to evade responsibility or to obtain sympathy or to become the center of attention. For some people illness is 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. Although his ministry also consisted of preaching and teaching and leading people into a loving relationship with each other and with God, his healing ministry was so crucial that almost one fifth of the gospel stories are devoted to his healing of individuals. His healing ministry was a practical application of his teaching. What better way is there 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.

Not only has the church as the body of Christ been instrumental in emphasizing the relationship between spiritual and physical health and the power of prayer in healing; in addition the church in history has often taken the lead in other forms of healing. It is no accident that almost all of the early hospitals in this country and in other parts of the world were started by Christian church groups.

It is the Christian church which has sent medical missionaries throughout the world. As Christians we affirm God's gifts of the medical and psycho-therapeutic professions.

As Christians we also affirm and support the major advances in eradicating disease which have come about through modern sanitation methods and other public health advances. Did you know, for example, that until the 20th century, a full quarter of children died before their first birthdays, and average life expectancy was 30 years. In 1840, English gentry whose homes had better sanitation lived on average to the ripe old age of 43, while laborers typically died at 23.

With the sanitation movement came the first realization by much of the Western world that disease was traceable to a particular source. People stopped blaming illness on shifting humors and the will of God and began to realize that contaminated water and rotten food were really the problem.

Sweeping across Europe beginning the mid-180-0s, government mandated waterworks, sewage systems, burial and waste disposal standards, paved streets and the extension of health care to the disadvantaged made dramatic gains on scourges like cholera and typhoid fever.

In addition in 1854, the French chemist Louis Pasteur launched the modern day germ theory, our understanding of microscopic organisms that live and interact with us. In 1874, rural German physician Robert Koch identifed the bacteria that caused anthrax in sheep. Later Koch discovered that both tuberculosis and cholera were caused by specific bacteria.

There was a down-side to all of these discoveries. Modern medicine came to expect that all

healing could be accomplished with specific medications. The spiritual side of our natures was given less importance and in some places even forgotten because humanity on its own with the discovery of vitamins was eradicating the scourges of scury, beriberi, pellagra and rickets. Then came the discovery of insulin in treating diabetes and pencillin and other antibiotics in treating various forms of infection. Various types of surgical procedures were also being perfected. As promised in the Bible, the blind were made to see, not only by faith but by cataract surgery.

Another aspect of this downside of scientific medicine is that we Americans in particular have trouble remembering that such things as rest, relief from stress, and the indulgence of time can aid healing. Or as Susan Sontag put it in her

book, "Illness As Metaphor," We have come to think of pain and any kind of illness as an enemy and appropriately medicine has adopted military terms--doctors "giving orders" and serving on medicine's "front lines," often using "magic bullets" to turn back "intruders." We forget that pain is not always an enemy but rather is a messenger warning us that something is wrong. Fortunately in the present day we are gaining more balance again and becoming more aware of unity of the spiritual and the physical. Many of the phrases in our everyday language reveal this. A person says, "I can't stomach it." Or "He's a pain in the neck." "I was scared stiff." "She died of a broken heart." "Butterflies on one's stomach," or "Getting cold feet," suggest nervousness.

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.

So in addition to many wonderful medications, intricate surgical procedures and sophisticated technologies in helping to make diagnosis more accurate, our Christian faith reminds us that much of our recovery from various diseases depends upon the mobilization of forces which already exist within us for resisting and overcoming disease. We all possess healing powers within us ready to go to work. This is what Dr. Herbert Benson calls "remembered wellness."

Religious faith including prayer and other rituals such as the healing services we will be holding

on the first Wednesday evening of each month can play a crucial role in the healing process. For example, in 1995, Dr. Thomas E. Oxman and his colleagues at Dartmouth Medical School reported that heart disease patients over the age of 55 who had had open heart surgery for either coronary artery or aortic valve disease, and who had received solace and comfort from their religious beliefs, were three times more likely to survive than those who did not.

In his book, TIMELESS HEALING, Dr. Benson also reports a number of other beneficial results in healing which come from religious faith. In an experiment performed by Dr. Peter Pressman of Northwestern University Medical School and his colleagues, thirty elderly women recovering from surgical corrections of their broken hips were

studied to assess the relationship between their religious beliefs and their medical and psychiatric health. Those with strong beliefs were able to walk significantly farther and were less likely to be depressed.

Other studies show that religious commitment is consistently associated with better health, according to Dr. Benson. The greater a person's commitment, the fewer his or her psychological symptoms, the better his or her general health, the lower the blood pressure, and the longer the survival.

Here's another quote from Dr. Benson's book. "Religious people consistently report greater life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, well-being, altruism and self-esteem than non- religious people.

Given everything we know about both remembered wellness and about the impact of stress and turmoil on our health, the happiness and contentment engendered by faith proves an extraordinary contributor to health." With all these benefits, why would anyone stay away from church?

Incidentally and especially appropriate at this time of year, Dr. Benson's research also revealed that helping others by doing volunteer work and regularly giving money to such institutions as the church; all of these activities increase one's overall well-being and health.

God's will for each one of us is good health. A large part of the church's ministry, following in the footsteps of Jesus is that of promoting heal-

ing, the healing of relationships, the healing of body and mind and the healing of society. We do this primarily through worship and prayer and through caring for each other in loving ways. Amen.