

## Let's Bring Back Faith Healing!

### Mark 1:21-28

Most of us here today assign little value to faith healing. In fact, we probably view the idea of faith healing with contempt. Its depiction as a religious practice is an embarrassment. You think of the faith healer as a preacher passing through. (He always seems to be passing through!) He wears a gaudy suit and has long, blown-dry and plastered down hair. The faith healer puts on a good show. At some point people come in a line to be “zapped” by the healer’s touch. When they recover, they bound around the stage celebrating their cure.

That’s the image we have of faith healing. That’s what we have seen on television and what we have seen presented in books and movies. Faith healing is a part of American religious life. In some places it is alive and well. But for us in the mainstream it is, at best, something on the fringe of faith.

By our attitudes and our practices we are saying either that there is nothing to the notion of faith healing or that there might be, but we don’t know what it is. Therefore, most of the time we simply avoid the subject.

It’s a little troubling, isn’t it, that Jesus first appeared on the scene as an exorcist and a healer. And since he usually looked for faith in those who came to him, you might call him a faith healer. Mark, the earliest gospel, tells us that Jesus began his ministry as an itinerant teacher and healer. Mark makes no bones about it. It was the healing that attracted the crowds. When Jesus came to Capernaum to call followers and to set up some kind of headquarters, he healed a man possessed by an evil spirit and healed Simon’s mother-in-law of a fever. Word quickly spread and people from throughout the area brought to him “all who were sick and demon-possessed, and the whole town gathered at the door” of the house where Jesus was staying.

Later, when Jesus trained his disciples and sent them out, he commissioned them “to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:2). To the very end Jesus himself carried on a ministry of healing. Some of our best-loved gospel stories have to do with healing. We read them; we tell them; but we don’t know quite what to do with them. When pushed for an explanation, we tend to explain them away.

It's highly unfortunate, indeed it's tragic, that the community of faith is so uncomfortable with the idea of healing and with the concept of faith healing. The need for a healing ministry is as great as ever. And, like those simple Galileans who clustered around Jesus, modern sophisticated people are drawn to the healing community. Oh, there are the physical problems. The list is familiar—cancer, heart disease, crippling ailments, Alzheimer's, AIDS, etc. But there are illnesses not necessarily expressed in the physical. People are plagued by compulsive patterns and fears. They are haunted by memory of abuse. They are crushed by broken relationships, unmanageable stress, and nagging guilt. There is all about us a general longing for wholeness and wellness.

What do we have to say to all those who seek to be healed? Modern American Christianity has said: Accept Christ and make yourself well. The tendency has been for us to say: Here are the instructions or directions for getting well; follow these guidelines and call us later.

Is that adequate? Should we just dance around the subject and leave faith healing to the traveling tent evangelist? Maybe we should bring back the idea of faith healing. No, I don't mean the theatrics and the staging and the zapping. (I'd be left out of any movement like that, because I don't own any flashy suits and my hair is getting gray and thin.) What I mean is this: Let us take seriously our commission from Jesus to carry out a ministry of faith healing,

Did you know that the word for salvation really means "healing"? The term is "soteria"; it is translated in the New Testament as "salvation" or as "healing." It means wholeness or completeness. It indicates deliverance from danger, suffering, sin, and death. John says that God sent his Son "that the world through him might be saved (or healed)" (3:17). Jesus the Christ came to deliver us from sin, sickness, and death and to make us well. He came to heal.

But we have limited that. We have limited the concept of salvation in two ways. On the one hand, we talk about salvation as a kind of judicial process whereby we move from one place to another in God's sight. We move from the "goats" to the "sheep," from the "unsaved" to the "saved." On the other hand, we don't discuss the physical,

mental, or emotional side of this experience. Those aspects of life don't figure into the formula. Consequently, our understanding of salvation is severely limited.

Jesus came to make people well and whole. His healing is broader than we have allowed it to be. Ours is the task of bringing healing to the whole person and to the whole of society. Robin Norwood treats this subject well in a book called *Why Me? Why This? Why Now?* She gives a good definition of healing: "Deep healing always involves a change of heart and therefore an expansion of consciousness. The cure of a physical condition or illness does not necessarily imply that meaningful healing has taken place. The continuation of a physical condition or illness, even if death eventuates, does not necessarily imply that meaningful healing has not taken place."

Norwood gives a beautiful illustration of deep healing. A young man named Darren was diagnosed as HIV-positive at the age of 21. As he came to grips with his situation, Darren underwent a total change of attitude. He gave up his promiscuous lifestyle and his drug use. He began to appreciate life and people. He actually began to try to serve others in whatever time he would have. Darren came to say this about his experience: "It sounds really funny to say that I'm grateful for this disease but in a way I am. It's taught me how to live. And not just me; my family, too. My grandmother's the one in our family with all the money, a real matriarch. She's always been critical of my friends and of the way I live. In fact, she used to accuse me of trying to get AIDS. Well, when she learned about my diagnosis, she ranted and raved and all she could think about was what other people would say. But when I made one of my trips to the hospital, she came to see me and told me I could live in her guest house and she'd cook for me. And she does. For my friends, too, who need a place to stay if they're sick and the AIDS shelter is full. She has donated a lot of money to the shelter and to individual patients. She's changed so much. Sometimes I think that's what my disease is all about. It's working on everybody, making them love more and share more, and be more tolerant."

Healing far transcends the merely physical. Usually, it's the physical that gets our attention or causes us to seek help. But it's the person as a whole who needs healing. Faith healing! Healing that comes through trust in Jesus the Christ! A change of mind, change of heart, reconciliation, the eradication of fear—these are all instances of healing. Those things and more are involved in the salvation process.

Can you see yourself as a faith healer, one who brings deliverance and contributes to wholeness? You should. Sometimes we perform the right act or say the right word and healing happens. You never know! A minister was shaking hands with the congregation after the service, and at the end of the line there came a man who attended church very rarely. This day he was excited. "Reverend," he said, "what you said in your sermon today was exactly what I needed to hear. It has changed my life. Thank you. Thank you very, very much." The minister was quite pleased and flattered. But his curiosity was also aroused. What profound comment had he made? He thought about it all Sunday afternoon. That evening he called the man and said, "I'm delighted that I said something helpful for you. Tell me. What was it?" The man answered, "You remember, you began your sermon by saying you had two things to talk to us about. Well, right in the middle you said, 'That completes the first point; now I move to the second part.' At that moment I realized that I had come to the end of one segment of my life and that it was high time to begin the next. Thank you, Reverend, that was brilliant."

You just never know. But you can know that all around are lives that need healing. Faith healing! Healing through faith in Christ and growth in Christlikeness. No one else offers that kind of healing. If I understand the human condition and the Christian gospel, we have before us a great need and a great message. Secularism has no answer for our need for wholeness. Only Christ heals, only Christ expressed in his people and their lives.

In my entire life and ministry I have never seen a clearly defined case of dramatic physical healing through faith or prayer. Perhaps such things happen. I cannot say one way or another. I will only say that I am skeptical. However, I have witnessed numerous examples of the power of Jesus the Christ to heal persons, to give strength, maturity, inspiration, and courage to endure any difficulty, pain, or loss and remain whole. I have seen faith make and keep a person well under the most extreme circumstances. Faith healing is real. Let's bring it back.

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