

PRAYERS OF PASTORAL CONCERN

Mark 9: 14-29; Matthew 17: 14-21

I've seen some remarkable things in ministry. I've also seen some sad things. Here's a remarkable thing. In my early years in ministry I served a congregation in a rural town in Quebec where there was also a Baptist church. The pastor and I would occasionally exchange pulpits. One of the things I enjoyed most when visiting his church was listening to his wife sing. She had a beautiful voice and she often sang solos. At one point, I was told that she had been diagnosed with a serious bout of cancer. It was so serious, in fact, her lungs kept filling up with fluid. We were asked as congregations within our ministerial to pray for her. We all prayed and prayed persistently for her healing. Over several months, however, her condition got worse. At one point, we were told her days were numbered and she was being treated palliatively. We anticipated receiving news any day that she had died.

The news never came. After several weeks I sent out enquires. The news was remarkable. She had been stepped up from palliative care to a regular hospital ward. What was going on? The answer I would get was this: prayer was healing her. I have to admit that even though I had encouraged and led in prayer for her healing, once we got to the point where her lungs were full and she was barely conscious, I was anticipating her death. But now she was recovering. How could this be? I asked what the doctors were saying. Evidently, they had no explanation. In fact, one doctor was using the language of "miracle."

In another few months she was discharged from hospital. A few months after that, she was singing solos in church again. Even though there were other folks who did not do as well as she had done, this example was being used as evidence of the healing power of prayer. In fact, the Baptist pastor himself was using his wife's example as evidence of the truth of the prosperity gospel. If you have faith, if you pray and if you are righteous before God, healing and good things will come your way. The cancer was given by God as testimony, to draw people into faith and the healing power of prayer.

I have to admit, though, even though I believe in unexplainable blessings, and even though I've spoken to doctors who have stories of remarkable healing that cannot be explained scientifically, I have also seen way too many examples of good people, and people surrounded by the prayer of the faithful, who have not experienced healing in any straightforward way.

Here's one example I still carry in my soul. Mena was an amazing woman I met early in my ministry in a new congregation. She was a pastoral care visitor, an elder and an astute participant in our bible study group. Most everyone had a story of how Mena had been there for them in time of difficulty and need. She was a beautiful soul inside and out and

everyone revered and respected her in the congregation. But Mena got sick. She had had a blood transfusion at one point and the blood had been tainted. Even though the government and public health had acknowledged the poor management of blood services, the reality for Mena was that her liver was failing and she would need a liver transplant.

As she got sicker, though, I noticed several things. On the one hand, she had made peace with the health system. Even though it was unfortunate that she and others had become sick, changes had been made and there were many more solid checks and balances for people needing blood now. That was good. But as Mena got sicker I noticed an edge in her. Was it anger? Was it something else? I knew that she had been betrayed and abandoned by a husband, but everyone, including her children, saw her as the victim and the fool her husband had been to leave such a beautiful and spirited woman. But somehow there was this sense of unfairness that seemed to live in her. Somehow she was no longer at peace. How can someone with such spiritual depth, a capacity to weep with others and care for them in a way where they felt it deeply, have this kind of discord inside her?

Eventually, thank God, she was called. There was a liver for her. The best transplant team in the city was assembled and the operation was a success. But how would she recover? How would the anti-rejection drugs be absorbed and processed in her. Unfortunately, Mena's health, spiritual condition and faith all went downhill. Try as we did to visit with her, pray with her, even have heart-to-heart talk with her... On my part, by the end, I felt like a failure. She was appreciative and all, and yet she had lost the heart for prayer. We read from the psalms and the gospels. She appreciated that. She hoped for healing. But something was missing.

In the end, Mena died. There was resentment, bitterness and anger in her. She was unreconciled. Our team of visitors and the whole congregation didn't quite know how to process Mena's death. I must say, preparing the words for a funeral meditation was one of the greatest challenges of my ministry. There had to be honesty and truth. And yet, we also had to find a way back to faith, hope and love to honour who she had been for so many, despite the way she died... How would we pray through all this?

Before we dive into our scripture reading in search of revelatory wisdom, let's lay out our core question. Does prayer make a difference in healing physical and mental illness? If we take the Baptist pastor's wife as our model of how prayer should work, we will claim that prayer does work, and the only way to explain the situations where it doesn't work is to put the blame on people somehow, not God. It must be that those praying for themselves or for someone sick and witness no concrete results are not worthy enough, faithful enough or they aren't praying in the right way.

Or, if illness comes and healing doesn't happen it must be interpreted as punishment or a test. This is what the biblical Job believes at first and what his friends keep telling him. But anyone who has read the book of Job will know Job protests this theology. In the end, he is vindicated for rejecting this theology and God asks Job to forgive his friends for their lack of compassion. Suffering and illness are not punishments, nor are they given to us as tests.

But what about Mena, then? Like Job, she, too, was protesting. But unlike Job, she didn't experience any vindication, healing or peace. She died sick in body and unreconciled in spirit, even though she was such a faithful person. Does her fate make a mockery of what faith and prayer are? Is it all a matter of luck and chance, hoping for the best but fearing the worst?

Now we are ready to dive into our scripture readings. Both readings are the same story, but told differently. In Mark's gospel, the focus is on the father of a child suffering from seizures. In Matthew's gospel, the focus shifts to the disciples and the wider crowd. It's all about faith and doubt when it comes to prayer.

OK, if I were a prosperity gospel believer, I'd have absolutely no problems interpreting these passages literally. Jesus successfully heals those people who have faith. Faith can move mountains, so to speak, which means faith can heal. Prayer can heal. Some illnesses are so serious only prayer can heal them. If there is no healing, the problem is a lack of faith or inadequate praying.

OK, if you can believe that good for you. I can't believe that. I've seen too much and felt too much at the heart level that makes a mockery of such a formula for faith and prayer. But unlike some people, I haven't given up on faith or prayer either. Rather, I've dug into those same scriptures and sat before God and the Spirit with them, praying for enlightenment. Is there another way to hear Jesus' teaching and guidance here? There is... There is... Let's lay it out piece by piece.

First of all, Jesus is a healer, just like our whole medical system is a healer. There would have been basic illnesses in Jesus' time, such as these epileptic-like seizures, where through his power, prayer and therapeutic touch, infection would be dealt with and healing would happen. Even Jesus' enemies recognized his healing gifts. Moreover, we know Jesus wasn't unique as a healer. There were other healers around too, although Jesus was recognized as a particularly gifted one.

Jesus also tried to teach his disciples the healing arts. Prayer and faith empowered people to come forward and ready their minds and bodies for what was possible when healing energy flowed through. This is real. Medical studies today will tell us that prayer, faith,

healing touch, compassion and a hope-filled attitude through any illness significantly increases healing results and quality of life.

But there were also things Jesus was powerless to do. Jesus couldn't stop decay and dying, even though he was able to resuscitate a few persons who were unconscious and believed to be dead. He couldn't prevent accidents or natural disasters, even though there is some claim he calmed a storm in the middle of the night. He couldn't stop hard-heartedness, cruelty, betrayal and violence toward others or himself, even though many opened their hearts to him. And there were those situations where we're told Jesus could offer no healing because people were just shut off from faith in him altogether.

OK, so what can we learn here about the power of faith and prayer. First of all, faith and prayer can make a difference. But if we are deeply invested in those persons and situations we are praying for, we will also hit the limits of our faith. Like the father in the gospel story we will cry out: I believe, help my unbelief! Jesus honours this father. The disciples lacked that kind of prayerful investment because it wasn't their child who was sick. They could walk away but the father of the child could not. He had spent years searching for some healer or cure and he had spent all the money he had. Nothing had worked. He was emotionally spent and broken. Jesus must restore him to spiritual health even as he heals the boy of his condition.

We, too, need healing of spirit as much as body, whether we or a loved one recover from an illness or whether we must face the journey of dying and accompanying the dying. How will our faith and our praying enrich our souls and our bodies in a healing way even as our bodies and minds may give out in the end? We can give up and throw faith and prayer out the window because it doesn't give us the outcome we're narrowly focussed on. Or we can believe simplistically and cruelly that if we or a loved one do not heal, it's our fault and we are being punished for it somehow. I prefer to believe that healing will always happen, but not in the way we expect. And sometimes, our experience of healing is happening side by side with our sorrow for the decline and death that also comes. If I experience greater peace and surrender as I move toward death, that is healing too.

Having said that, I really want to reach out to those of you who have lost loved ones, and those of you who are facing a future with death on the horizon most likely. Healing must come to you. That is the promise of Jesus and the promise of God. Healing must come to you. Whether it comes to you physically or not despite the best that our healers can offer, seek out healing of your spirit that must carry you through and beyond death. May you never be imprisoned by bitterness or despair. May hope arise in you bigger than this life alone. May the threads of love that link you with loved ones stretch beyond bodily survival or maintenance of mind and memory. Our lives and the relationships we form are worth much more than one lifetime can contain.

And be like the father of the child when you pray. 'Dear God, I believe, but help my unbelief. I am vulnerable, I cannot see what tomorrow may bring, and the challenges of today are overwhelming me. Some days and moments I am lost in the pain and the distress. You seem very far away and sometimes I feel you have abandoned me. Come again and resurrect faith and hope in me. Come again and fill my heart anew with love... Heal me and heal the one I love. Heal in ways I cannot imagine and heal despite my faltering faith and doubt-filled heart... in Jesus' name'...
Amen.