

Sermon for the beginning of the Ministry of Anointing and Prayer for Healing
at Grace Church in Scarborough.

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The Gospel stories are full of healing stories. How come they don't happen anymore?

If you ask this to a small gathering of Christians you get a fairly rapid response that they do! But we don't talk about them much.

Healing, in our society, is done by Doctors and Hospitals. Oddly, "doctor" means a "teacher", and has its root in the same place as "doctrine" which means "teaching". "Hospital" has its root alongside "hospitality", the practice of welcoming in people in need. Both are children of the church, where healing and caring are part of the ordinary activity of the church. But over the last generation or two, teaching and healing have been professionalized and secularized. Clean white sheets, coats and rational minds have followed the model of science. Our child has grown up and left home!

Healing, though, is not our possession, which has been carried off by the medical profession. Healing is the activity of God. God still needs our presence, as his body on earth, to continue the work.

There is a TV show in my favorite area of home reno shows. The home-owners ask the reno guy, Brian, to help them with a project. He will help, but only where he thinks it will benefit the family most. People ask for the kitchen to be extended, and he reconfigures the basement. They ask for a renewed washroom and he remodels the bedrooms. Fury is their first reaction, but it always ends up with them saying, "Yes, but I never would have seen that. This was a way better thing to do with our house! Thanks Brian!"

When you bring yourself to God for healing, you put yourself into God's hands, and God decides which part of the whole You needs healing first. I am not sure how you get yourself on the home-reno show. But I am better at knowing how you get yourself to the healing place.

In this sermon I want to tell you about the way we will be offering anointing and ministry of prayer for healing. I will talk about how to prepare for it, and about what to expect from it.

Getting in the right place and space.

Firstly, I will talk about healing in the church. Now, God cannot be contained. God gets on with healing people when and where she wants to, and you cannot seem to predict where that will be. But in the church we come, by intention, to gather as a family of disciples of Jesus. We come to be in the presence of the God we meet in Jesus. We put ourselves, as it were, in the path of the Spirit of God. And God honours

our intention. When we gather in his name, he will be there. That's the promise we trust in. Like Jesus in today's Gospel, walking intentionally into the river with John the Baptist, it was no surprise that God spoke to him there. So you come to healing in Church with an expectation that God knows you are coming. You have thought about this. You have pondered the things that are hurting you. You have realized there is not much more that you can do to heal yourself, and you long to be at peace, at one with yourself and your world, and with your God. So you bring this longing. This longing is your prayer. You bring a prayer for healing to a God who is waiting for you.

So, preparation for healing is a first, and vital step. Coming to the church in an attitude of prayerfulness is part of that step.

Touch and words

Most of the healings of Jesus involved touch. The early church used touch and anointing. Everyone used words.

Anointing

The way we offer healing through anointing or through prayers allows you two choices.

Some of us find it hard to put into words the deep longing of our hearts. We don't want a conversation. Some of us are deeply sacramental and are moved by the bread and the wine, the water in baptism. Here the anointing with holy oil is the path to take.

You come towards the person offering anointing, wait for them to be free, and then walk forward towards them. That person will reach out towards your forehead, and with a finger moistened with oil, will make the sign of the cross on you. As this is done a simple word of blessing is said.

To receive this you need to hear the words coming from Jesus, and the touch be of his hand, and the oil be the soaking in of his touch. You need to open your heart and your mind to the mystery that God has touched you, and now you are not the same. There are no proper words of response. You simply need to let the oil from your forehead seep, as it were, into the places in your body, and more importantly, into your soul, where there is aching damage and debilitating illness. As it seeps, from skin to cell to spirit to heart to soul to body, like the energy of life, be respectful of God at work in you.

Some people will come for anointing on the way to communion, some on the way back. It is not crucial which. But walk quietly. Absorb quietly. Hold it in with reverence.

Prayers for Healing

The preparation and actual getting there and back again are much the same. Look for the person who is doing the healing each Sunday.

When it is your turn you may be asked what you bring for healing. So you need to have thought about what you will say. It may be that you ask about your fear of a cancer growing within you. Perhaps it is the broken relationship with your daughter. It could be that you feel tired and without much hope in your heart. You may be praying for healing for your friend's sick child. You need to be able to say, "I ask healing for....." Don't give a lot of details or say more than sentence or two. God

knows your prayer. But it matters to put it into words so that the healer can listen better for words God may give that you can hear. The person will reach out and place a hand on your shoulder and quietly offer a prayer to God for you. When the hand lifts from you, there is no need to say anything in particular. Often a smile is all that is exchanged, or a thank-you. Again, hold it inside with tenderness. The words, like the oil, need time to seep in.

Waiting and seeing

It is often not at all clear what, if anything has happened after coming for healing. Sometimes it is immediately clear and strongly experienced. And usually, it is somewhere in between.

Jesus once tells a story of a woman who repeatedly asks a judge for justice, and says that we need to repeatedly ask God for what we need. You see, it is in the asking that we make a channel for God's grace to open. We may need to prepare often in order for there to be room enough cleared in our souls to allow the Spirit in.

Sometimes the healing begins slowly, like yeast mixed in flour. Nothing seems to happen. It needs moisture, or faith. It needs time, or patience. It needs warmth, or continued trust that God has not been deaf or forgetful.

Healing can happen so slowly that it is only in hindsight that it becomes clear, or through the eyes of another person.

And healing can be quick, changing your intentions, your mood, your feelings and health. Here the work is to hold onto the gratitude and re-align your life to flow with the grace given to you. Something given quickly can be quickly forgotten. God knows this, and so responding to a healing is vital to hold the healing deep in the body and soul. Practicing generosity in response to a gift is the work of being healed.

Rejoice in what you are given , not what you asked for, or when.

Like the-reno show participants, be open to God's sense of play, or of priorities. God may well ignore your request for less grey hair, and offer you instead the gift of tears, long withheld, for your father's death. It may be peace of heart which God knows you need more than a new hip, or faith and hope more than relief from stress. God never ignores you. It may feel he says "No", but it is more likely "Not yet." Or "Not that, but this"

Receiving healing takes often as long as the injury took to become painful. I speak of souls as well as bodies. So take the long view.

In all cases never give up expectation of healing, and in prayer keep telling God you are still waiting and watching for his grace.

I suggest to people who are serious that they keep a journal of their prayer and what is happening in their life. Then you can read back and notice how quietly God has been answering your prayer.

Lastly, at some point in the service, pray for those who risk offering themselves in this ministry. It has not been done lightly, or without consulting with others. Pray a blessing on them.

And may you find in God the healing you need.