

Homily – Your Faith Has Made You Well

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Could you feel the excitement in the air this past week? No, I'm not talking about the upcoming elections, and I'm not talking about the huge lotto jackpots, though both of these are very exciting. And, I'm not even talking about the two performances of the opera Carmen that I sang in last week. Though, I have to admit this is very exciting, for me.

The excitement in the air that I am referring to is the number of prayers to God by Dodgers and Yankees fans. Since the Dodgers are ahead in the series, two games to none, one might assume that the LA fans were somehow more worthy. Or, maybe there aren't as many prayers for the Yankees. Around the world every year trillions of prayers are lifted up to God about one sports team or another, and this past week, I know that included prayers from some of you that are here today.

Now I don't mean to make too much light of prayers for the World Series because in my own spiritual journey I believe that we are meant to lift up our desires and petitions to God. No matter how large or how small we are to pray what is on our hearts, and if the Dodgers or Yankees were on your heart this past week, then it was very appropriate for you to pray about your team.

It is also appropriate for us to pray for the elections. If it on our hearts and minds, then we are to pray to God. I have certainly been thanking God for the opera last weekend. I was very blessed.

Now, prayer and meditation come in many forms. In our Old Testament reading we have Job sharing a prayer of repentance in which he is submitting to the glory and majesty of God. In our Psalm we have a prayer of praise to God, and in our New Testament reading from the Book of Hebrews we have instructions on intercessory prayer. Finally, this morning's Gospel reading is not specifically about prayer, but it, and readings like it, are the basis of much of what we think about healing

prayer or petition prayers in which we are specifically asking God to do something for us.

“Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.”

Now, like many contemporary Christians, I struggle with the New Testament’s healing stories. I don’t distrust them, exactly. I don’t doubt that Jesus healed the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the leprous. But I don’t quite know what to do with these miracle stories. Should I read them as metaphors for spiritual healing and renewal? Should I take them literally, but only as unique 1st century proofs of Jesus's deity? Should I regard them as myths from a pre-scientific era? Or should I — as I was taught to do as a child — believe that miraculous healings continue to this day, and that God’s children have every right to pray for them, expect them, and proclaim them?

I don’t know about these healing stories. And, all I can say is that I struggle. I don’t want to leap to metaphor too quickly, when it’s clear in the Gospels that Jesus cared about the physical, embodied lives of everyone he met. But I also don’t want to hold out false hope to anyone. I suppose one easy “out” would be to say, “Well, healing happens when it’s God’s will.” Perhaps that caveat works for some people, but it doesn’t work for me. As far as I can tell, Jesus never said “no” to anyone who asked him for physical healing.

Now, my core struggle with the healing miracles is that I don’t seem to be able to make them happen when I want them to happen. I haven’t been able to tame God or make God into a vending machine that produces a healing when I deposit the proper prayer.

So, I have conflicting thoughts and feelings about the faith healing that is in today’s Gospel reading. And, with this conflict, I turned to a book by Ken

Blue called "Authority to Heal." And, here are some things that I learned about faith healing from this book.

There are at least three barriers that need to be overcome to allow faith healing to progress. See if you recognize any of these barriers.

First, one of the greatest hindrances to a vital healing ministry in the church today is the notion that sickness is essentially good for us, that it is sent to us to purify the soul and build character. This abusive belief must be stopped. The concept that pain and illness are sanctifying must be overcome to allow people to have the desire to be healed.

Here is a second barrier to bring down; the belief that God intends a person to be stricken, and healing them would be countering the will of God. When we say "God controls all events," we logically imply that God decrees pain or comfort wherever they are found. By extension if God has decreed sickness, no amount of prayer may alter that state. I believe that this mistaken belief, that God wants a person to be sick, is based on a warped view of God and is not the God that is revealed to us through Jesus. This second belief must also be stopped or order to allow faith healing.

There is a third barrier, the belief that a person must have great faith to be healed. If they are not healed, then it is a person's own fault since they must not have had enough faith. This is a blame the victim mentality that is counter to our lived experiences. We have all seen people of great faith who are not healed and vice versa.

I want to encourage us to let go of these three barriers to healing and believe in the effectiveness of prayer. If you want healing from illness, disease or accidents, then pray to God about it.

Healing prayer is incredibly powerful and incredibly intimate. It is a very vulnerable state in which a person is opening themselves up to their inner needs and hopes. For me, doing healing prayer with a person is an honor and a privilege.

Now, I have learned at least three things when visiting a person in the hospital or in their home. I've shared these before, but I want to share these three things again since they may be useful to you in your own healing ministries.

First, when praying with a person, ask if the person wants prayer. As I said, healing prayer can be very intimate and diving in with prayer, when you haven't been asked, is an intrusion. So, I ask if a person wants prayer.

Second, I ask what a person wants to have included in the prayer. If a person has transitioned to hospice care then they may not want prayers for healing but may want prayers for other things instead, like control of pain and peace of mind.

Third, some people need to be given permission to ask for prayers for themselves. Some grew up in the Depression era and just don't like to ask for things for themselves. But, it is OK. And, some are so used to helping others that they don't know how to ask for help for themselves.

And, some are afraid that if they ask the answer to their request for healing will be "no" and this feels like rejection. In this instance, it is important to remind people of God's eternal and unchanging love. God is always embracing us, even when we don't see it. We don't need to be good enough to earn God's love. Two thousand years ago Jesus took care of healing our relationship with God. God is never going to reject us. Though we sometimes conflate the two, an answer of "no" from God is not a rejection.

Finally, we sometimes don't ask God for healing for ourselves because there is a belief that healing can only occur through the secular medical systems or through medication. We often don't believe that God will work directly through a person to provide healing. However, the healing ministry of Jesus is evidence of his divine nature and evidence of our calling to continue to care for and heal the sick. This is not only healing of the body, but also of the mind and spirit.

Now, many Sunday mornings during our ten o'clock service, we have healing prayer available to you. During the Eucharist we have folks in the back who are available to pray with you. These are the folks wearing the blue stoles or scarves around their necks.

In addition, we have a prayer chain here at St. Barnabas. There are about fifty of us on the prayer chain, and we are happy to know of your prayer needs so that we can be praying for you. By the way, we are looking for new people to join our prayer chain so let us know if you are feeling called to be part of this ministry.

And in a few minutes we will be doing our Prayers of the People which includes intercessory prayers that have been written in the prayer book in the back. We also include prayer requests that have been written in the prayer book at the St. Barnabas Thrift Shop. I welcome you to write your prayer needs in that books so that we can all pray.

Finally, if you are feeling called to be part of visitation ministries or prayer ministries, then let one of us know, and we can help get you equipped and engaged.

However, always remember that healing prayer is not just for a few. God works through all of us to provide healing. We must have the desire for healing, the belief that it is possible, and take action through prayer to ask for healing. We must be open to the workings of the Holy Spirit and be willing to take the risk that the response might be different than we desire. We must be willing to share the pain of those suffering and continue praying when healing is not evident.

We may not be able to use prayer to control the World Series or the lotto, or even healing, but this should not cause us to stop praying. I invite you to make healing prayer part of your daily conversations with God.