

## Is there a Doctor in the House?

A Sermon by

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Scripture: James 5: 13-16

The doctor finally got through on the phone to his patient. "Listen," the physician said. "The lab results are in and I've got bad news and terrible news." "Oh dear," the patient responded, "Well, give me the bad news first."

"It appears that you only have 24 hours to live," stated the doctor in a measured tone. "What!" exclaimed the patient upon hearing the news. "If that's the bad news what could possibly be worse than that."

"I've been trying to reach you since yesterday," replied the doctor.

While jokes like these abound in our society, we all know that when it comes to diagnosis and disease the topic of healing is no laughing matter. Many of us in the mainline Protestant Churches like The United Church of Canada are more than a little edgy when it comes to figuring out the connection between our spirituality, science and healing. While we might want to duck and cover when it comes to the subject, the Bible is full of healing stories and Jesus' ministry was so full of healing that the Christian tradition refers to Jesus as "The Great Physician." So, if Jesus is the doctor in the house of God what do we, as disciples of the Great Physician, have to say on the topic of healing?

One of the most famous passages regarding healing in the early church is found in the letter of James. James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem after Christ's resurrection offers his testimony in this brief but powerful letter. It is believed that the letter of James we have today in our Bibles was probably written in at least two stages. The original text was likely a sermon by James delivered and recorded in the months leading up to his martyrdom in the mid 60s AD. The second stage was done by the community of faith that James led as they expanded his sermon in light of the gospel witness of the gospel of Matthew and Luke and possibly even the letters of Paul. The end result is a concise and punchy little letter that instructs members of the early church on a wide range of topics from salvation to service, hospitality to healing. The letter of James has endured a bumpy ride in the Reformed tradition ever since Martin Luther developed a beef with the letter's theology, especially its claim that faith without works is dead. (James 2: 17) Luther's theology of justification by faith alone has often served as the schoolyard bully to James equally important claim that intellectual asset to the faith unmatched by the practice of love, service and compassion to others is without value. And while Luther called this letter an "epistle of straw" and expressed his desire to "burn up Jimmy," perhaps our greater struggle today is in Chapter 5 with its call for healing. James writes:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 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; anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. (James 5: 13-16)

Now, I don't know about you but I have no trouble with verses 13-15 in today's reading. James' instruction to encourage the suffering to pray and the cheerful to sing songs of praise makes sense. As does his call for the sick (the weakest member of the community) to request the church elders to visit (the most powerful members of the community) and anoint with oil and add prayers in the strong name of Jesus. This last bit doesn't phase me, partly because I understand the anointing of oil, along with the majority of scholars, to be more a sign of the Holy Spirit than to have an "magical healing power" in the oil itself. The part that gets tricky for me is verse 16. "The prayer of faith will save the sick." Hmm. Is it just me or does this begin to stray towards the advice and opinion that makes me cringe when people say, "If you just pray hard enough God will heal your cancer, your dying spouse, your sick child" leaving the impression that after prayer if the person or their loved one declines in health or even dies that it's their fault for not having enough faith. United Church congregations like our own are made up of mostly rational, modernists who place their faith primarily in the hands of the doctor in the house, seeing their faith and the prayers of others in a supporting role. God as healer, Christ as the Great Physician is, at best, a quiet part of our tradition and at worst an embarrassment best not to mention at cocktail parties.

The great American Preacher Dr. Fred Craddock tells the story of when he was a faculty member of a prestigious seminary and one day a rather rough looking woman knocked on his office door. "I need your help outside with my car, she said. When they got aside she opened the back door of her small car and revealed her severely crippled teenage son in the back seat. "I want you to heal him," she said to this distinguished professor, preacher and theologian. "Well...well..." Craddock stammered trying his best to explain an enlightened understanding of how God may or may not heal through the medical profession in our times. "Is this not a seminary? Are you not a Christian leader?" the angry woman spat in Craddock's direction. "Yes." Craddock replied meekly. "Well, what good are you then?" the woman shouted as she got in her car and drove off, kicking up gravel as she left. Fred Craddock, shaken, said that he returned to his desk to shuffle papers, meet with students and present an outward appearance of normalcy even though he was crushed on the inside.

It is clear that the woman was looking for the "prayer of faith" that saves the sick as promised in James' epistle. But the reality is that healing is mysterious from both a scientific and spiritual perspective. We see, as Paul says, through a mirror dimly, and why some people are spared physical harm while others suffer is uncertain. No amount of degrees in theology will be able to resolve that dilemma.

Although I'm a Globe and Mail guy in the morning I really appreciated a member of our church bringing in a copy of the Toronto Sun this week for its appropriate imagery on the front cover for today's service. On the top right hand corner was a picture of a survivor of that horrific car crash on the QEW where a tractor trailer spilled off one ramp and onto another. While one man was killed, a survivor was shown standing with a shocked expression and quoted as saying that God saved his life. Below this front page article the sad news of the young boy in Barrie whose body was found after running away from home after a fight with his parents over an Xbox video game. Police ruled out foul play and it appears the young boy died accidentally from a fall. The mother is quoted as saying that "God has abandoned them." These two articles, juxtaposed as they were, highlighted the

dilemma of healing. Surely, both these groups of people prayed with the same fervor and sincerity and yet the outcome was completely different.

All of our lives here today bear testimony to these two extremes, don't they? Sometimes our prayers of faith for healing, health and wholeness are answered and we rejoice. Other times the outcome is tragic and we weep bitter tears.

Even Fred Craddock, you remember the seminary Professor left stunned in the parking lot as the car drove off, tells of an opposite experience years earlier when he was a young pastor visiting a sick congregation member in hospital. At the end of the friendly visit Craddock asked the older woman if she would like him pray. "Of course, pastor," she replied. "And what would you like me to pray for?" Craddock responded. Astonished, the woman said with an indignant tone, "well, for healing of course." Okay, thought Craddock and he offered a simple prayer asking God to heal this woman. After the Amen of the prayer the woman thanked Craddock and said that she felt better already. In fact, she threw back the sheets, sat up straight, loosened up old joints, and jumped out of bed. "I feel great now pastor!" she said with overwhelming enthusiasm. Stunned, Craddock retreated from the hospital room to his car, sat behind the wheel and prayed, "Lord, don't you ever do that to me again!"

Perhaps there is more life in this old passage of James than we first realized. You see, James would be appalled along with us if he saw the images on TV of Evangelists and faith healers slapping people on the head one minute and selling their latest book of quackery the next. The reading from the book of James today places an emphasis on at least three things – the power of prayer, the necessity of the Christian community and the trust that God offers healing in accordance with a heavenly will we sometimes don't understand.

First of all, the power of prayer opens us up to be honest about where we are broken. This week in staff meeting as we prayed and planned today's worship I asked all our staff the question, "Without worrying about *how* it would happen, name one thing you would like to change in your life?" It's a question you could ask yourself right now in this sanctuary. What is one thing that you would like to change in your life? Don't worry about how the change would happen, whether by your power or another's...just think about one thing that you would like to change in your life? I imagine if we had time to go around and hear from folks we would get a fairly consistent response dealing with the longing for relationships that could be restored, missed opportunities reclaimed, short comings corrected and so forth. Most of these desires reflect, in a word, our *brokenness*. When we talk of healing, we first need to know what is broken. Prayer opens us up to identify those parts of our bodies, minds and spirits that are broken. Jesus Christ, the Great Physician, broken on the cross, longs to heal us and meets us in our place of brokenness.

We know, however, that prayer on our own is not enough. We need a community of faith to help us in our struggles. I read a fascinating article in the Globe and Mail this week that told the story of an impromptu group that has sprung up at the Kandahar Air Base in Afghanistan calling themselves "Sober in the Sand." It is an Alcoholics Anonymous group made up of soldiers from various NATO countries and even civil workers on the base right down to the Tim Horton's employees. Even though the Air Base is dry, these alert and prayerful folks were mindful that they needed a community to help them in their brokenness under the most stressful of circumstances.

The church too is a gathering place of people from all different backgrounds who prayerfully gather with an incredible variety of gifts, skills and experience but also as children of God prayerfully

mindful of our brokenness and the need for one another just as James calls for the sick to be anointed with oil by the Elders.

The outcome of our life of prayer and commitment to Christian community will be healing of some kind. After all, a faithful translation of the word salvation is wholeness. Our discipleship to Christ, the great physician, is one of wholeness in this life and the life to come. When we anoint with oil as a sign of the spirit and trust in the prayer of faith to heal, we release the need to control the outcome and belief instead that God offers healing in ways that we cannot ask for or imagine.

I know I had this experience years ago when working as a chaplain at Toronto Western Hospital. A patient requested a United Church chaplain after some negative experiences with chaplaincy of other varieties. The man was dying of AIDS. His partner visited every day but beyond that connected the patient seemed totally alone. No cards, flowers, visits from family. The man explained that he grew up in the United Church and those memories of faith were bringing him great comfort in his final days. We read Scripture, sang a couple of his favourite hymns, and prayed for healing (at his request) even though he knew that his earthly body was in its final days. What none of us would have expected is how God answered that prayer for healing. In this man's final days, family members across southern Ontario were finally located and informed of their brother's imminent death. Racked by guilt over the family fight that had separated them for so long, family members gathered around the bedside in his final hours, asked for forgiveness, hugged and kissed the man and held him until death. Somewhere in that cold, stark, hospital room you could smell the sweet fragrance of the Great Physician's oil.

My friends, in a few moments, we are going to stand and sing a powerful hymn from Voices United entitled, "Healer of our Every Ill." As we do so Rev. Maurice and I will be up here at the front of sanctuary with healing oil. I don't know what may be broken in your life this day – body, mind or spirit – but God knows. You have prayed prayers of faith for healing, the Elders of the church are here assembled, all that's left is for you to come forward during the hymn, and in the tradition of the early church receiving the sign of the cross on your forehead and the blessing of the Trinity. No one will watch you, no one will judge, no one will know or ask why you come forward. All that matters is that you come hungry for the touch of the Great Physician, the smell of God's healing oil, and the comfort of the Spirit who makes all things new. Amen.