

*Healing prayer*

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*Luke 17.11-19; James 5.13-18*

Jesus must have been fit. He certainly covered a lot of kilometres on foot during his ministry. He would meet other travelers as well as sorts of people by the road—merchants, tax collectors, beggars. Jesus was just south of Galilee, approaching a village, perhaps to stay the night or to buy food, when he encountered a group of lepers—people with leprosy. Perhaps they had heard that he was coming.

Leprosy is a disfiguring chronic disease caused by particular kinds of bacteria working in people who have an inherited genetic susceptibility. It's transmitted mostly by close contact. The law of Moses made lepers keep separate; their disease made them ritually unclean. Often they were despised and subjected to superstition.

"Keeping their distance," the text says, the ten called out: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

When he saw them, Jesus gave them a simple instruction, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Only a priest could perform the role of health inspector, so to speak, to declare a leper healed, cleansed and able to rejoin society; there are elaborate instructions about this in Leviticus 14.

Jesus must really have looked at the lepers and felt their cry for mercy, for they lepers understood that Jesus' words were the answer to their plea. When he told them what to do, they did it. The ten started the long walk south to Jerusalem, for that's where the priests were, at the Temple.

"And as they went," the writer says—as they acted in response to Jesus' words—"they were made clean."

As one of them saw his skin healed, he turned around and ran back. Full of praise to God, he found Jesus and threw himself at Jesus' feet, "and he thanked him."

Although gratitude is not synonymous with faith, I am slowly beginning to learn that that they are joined to each other.

"And he was a Samaritan," the writer adds—not only a leper, but a despised foreigner as well; a double outcast, supposedly not entitled to any favours from God at all.

Where the text says that the ten were 'made clean' from leprosy, the Greek word, *iaomai*, means simply that they were physically healed, cured in body.

But when Jesus said to the one that came back, "Your faith has made you well", a different word is used: *sodzo*. It means 'made whole,' 'made complete' and in particular 'saved.' It's the word for salvation. Jesus told the grateful Samaritan that his faith had not only cured his leprosy but had fully healed him in body, soul and spirit. He alone of the ten received the saving fullness of what Jesus had to give. Jesus' healing, Gospel healing, is healing of the whole person.

I don't think the other nine were ungrateful. How could anyone receive such a miracle and not be grateful? My guess is that they were simply so full of joy at the gift they'd received that they paid little attention to its source.

"Were not ten made clean?" Jesus asked, "The other nine, where are they?" Was he critical? Concerned? Hurt? We don't know. We don't know what tone of voice he used when he asked, "Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Jesus

rejoiced at the good reports of healing and deliverance after he sent out the seventy. I'd like to think that Jesus was laughing and smiling on this occasion, too.

"Your faith has made you well," Jesus said. How much faith was enough, is enough? And what is this faith? A little earlier in this chapter the disciples ask Jesus, "Increase our faith." This was a reasonable request as Jesus had admonished them repeatedly for lack of faith. Yet Jesus' answer was that they didn't need more faith; the tiniest amount imaginable is more than enough—a grain of mustard seed's worth of faith was enough to enable great things. What Jesus wanted, I think, was that the disciples take hold of their faith and use it. The challenge for us is to trust the faith that we already have—by acting on it.

Naaman's problem was that at first he couldn't accept that a simple action in response to a simple message from the prophet Elijah would be good enough—especially for someone of such great station as himself and with such a great need.

A simple explanation of faith is 'trust'. If we have faith in someone, we trust them. If I have faith in something, I trust it to work, not fall down, break or whatever. How is my faith demonstrated? Through simple action. I stand on a ladder if I have faith in it. We eat vegetables because we have faith that they will nourish us. It's one thing to believe an airline schedule, but if I have at least some faith in the airline, I'll pack my bag and go to the airport at the advertised time.

The lepers heard Jesus' words. The words implied that they would be healed by the time they reached the priests. They acted on the words. They were cured.

All people need healing. We all need restoration to wellbeing, in body, mind and spirit, because we are all imperfect. Healing is Church business. It's very much our business. Our prayer books and liturgies are rich in healing prayer. The message of the Gospel is that healing is part of God's gift to us in Jesus Christ, and the Church is commissioned to offer God's healing.

There are many ways of healing. Just to listen attentively can be healing. Good food and an opportunity to rest are healing. Hospitality is healing. And healing comes through prayer.

There are many images of healing in the Bible. The leaves of the tree of life are for "the healing of the nations", Revelation tells us in just one example. "For you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings," Malachi says; another example.

We acknowledge God as Lord of the universe but sometimes we find it hard to believe this God could be interested in the small details of our needs, for healing or otherwise. We are reluctant to trouble our heavenly Father, who presumably is very busy with a billion and one things to do. We count ourselves unworthy to make a request.

Permit me to say, gently and as respectfully as I can, that that is unbelief. It's humility of a kind yes, but Jesus taught the humility that accepts God's love for us as children, not the humility of a subordinate too fearful to trouble the boss with a simple request.

The repentant tax collector in Jesus' parable didn't hide, but stood meekly before God and prayed "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus said he went home justified.

"Cast your cares on the Lord, for he cares for you." Peter tells us (I Peter 5.7). Even the hairs on our heads are numbered. Jesus taught, in the Lord's Prayer for example, that we are to ask God for our everyday needs, our daily sustenance.

The scriptures have many statements that God cares about us and our health and healing. In today's Psalm:

“Bless the Lord, O my soul and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases . . . who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live . . .”

Yes, our bodies do wear out with age and there comes a time simply to ask for comfort. Yet God is the creator of every cell of our beings. Can we not ask for help when something is wrong?

James says in the part of his letter that we’ve read this morning: “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.” Note that the word here is *should*— it’s something we *ought* to do when we are sick. Belief here is simply to accept that this is what the Lord asks us to do. Faith is expressed simply by asking for anointing and prayer. That’s it.

“The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.” This is healing of the whole person, like that received by the Samaritan former leper who returned to thank Jesus.

James says more: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” Not only are church leaders to pray. We are *all* to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other so that we may be healed. Every one of us may pray for others if asked. Every one of us is encouraged to seek the prayer of others.

Yes, the Holy Spirit gives particular gifts of healing to some, for the benefit of the whole church—we read about this in 1 Corinthians 12. Yes, there is a particular ministry for the anointing of the sick, with laying on of hands. Yes there are many, many, ways of loving, hospitable, healing care. There are even ways to heal ourselves, with God’s help. Nevertheless when James tells us to confess our sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that we may be healed, that’s for any and all of us.

It isn’t complicated. In fact it shouldn’t be complicated. It’s not a counseling session. Think how simple and short the healing words of Jesus are in the gospels. “Gracious God, heal . . . of his illness, free him from pain, restore him in every way. In Jesus’ name I pray. We thank you Lord.”

Let’s encourage each other with this kind of healing prayer. Let’s have simple trust in God and each other, to ask for prayer when we have a need of healing, and to offer a prayer when asked. God’s response will always be love. Let’s ask and allow the Holy Spirit to teach us to give and to receive this simple ministry of good news, a gift of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.