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Saint John's Episcopal Church
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

January 23, 2011
Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 4, verses 12-23.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

It was rumored that the owner of certain hardware store had discovered a cure for arthritis. As you might imagine, this stirred a great deal of interest in the small town where the hardware store was located. One day the locals saw a little old lady bent over on her cane enter the store for a visit. A little later this same lady came out walking almost perfectly straight and her head held high. The crowd cheered. "It's a miracle!" they declared. Then they wondered -- what did the owner of the hardware store do that allowed this poor lady to overcome her affliction? The little old lady explained the so-called miracle. "He sold me," she said, "a longer cane." (laughter)

I'll admit that that's not a great joke, but it does frame my topic for this morning. Here's a question that I want you, on this cold Sunday morning, to consider: Does Jesus heal people today?

There's no doubt that in many instances in the New Testament, Jesus performed works of healing. He healed bodies as well as minds. We read these important words at the end of the gospel from Matthew that I just read. "Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in the synagogues and preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people."

So healing bodies played a big role in Jesus' ministry. The question is: Does Jesus still heal people today? I must tell you that there are many conscientious Christians who believe Jesus healed people during New Testament times, but does not heal people today. Now, don't get me wrong. These people are not agnostics or atheists; they are very orthodox in all their beliefs, yet they cannot bring themselves to believe that Jesus still heals today.

There are many well thought-out reasons for this. For one thing, many of these people have become disenchanted by some of the so-called Christian healers who have taken advantage of people at their moment of gravest need. They have seen these unscrupulous charlatans exploit the yearnings of people who are hurting, and it turned them off.

You and I can appreciate their feelings. There's nothing worse than those who take advantage of weaker people in the name of Jesus. But there's another more compelling reason for people to question whether Jesus heals today. Many of them have seen people they love suffer terribly from a disease. They have prayed for these loved ones, and they have seen no change in their condition. So these believers have grown callus and disenchanted, and who can blame them? The silence of God can sometimes be quite dispiriting.

And some of these followers of Jesus who question whether Jesus heals today, have come to the conclusion that God has placed us in a lawful universe that precludes specific healing acts. They believe that in place of miraculous acts of healing, God has given us the wonders of medical science. God works today through great doctors and through wondrous technology and through amazing drugs, rather than through any supernatural miracles. And who can doubt the wonders of modern medical knowledge? So these believers make a compelling case for their lack of faith in healing miracles.

And finally, and I think most convincingly, many of these conscientious Christians have concluded that it would be unfair if God healed some people today but not others. Why would God heal one person's arthritis but not another's cancer, particularly if both were righteous persons? "Above all things," says scripture, "God is just." Thus, these conscientious followers of Jesus believe with all their heart that Jesus did heal people two thousand years ago, but not today. They believe that Jesus healed people in the New Testament only for the purpose of bringing people to faith. Healing was not his primary purpose; teaching and preaching were. He healed only to help people understand who he was sent, and certainly many people did believe in him because they saw his power to heal.

Have you ever thought about what it would have been like to live in Jesus' time when medicine was so primitive. Obviously, there were no antibiotics, nor were there any FDA-approved drug therapies.

Pliny the Elder, a Roman historian, published an encyclopedia around 70 A.D.

just after the time of Jesus. Pliny called his work *Natural History*. In *Natural History* Pliny revealed the generally low condition of medical science in the world during Jesus' time. He told how physicians prescribed curious concoctions for their patients. These concoctions were made from ashes of such things as burnt wolf's skull, stag's horns, heads of mice, the eyes of crabs, owl's brains, the livers of frogs and other like elements. For dysentery these doctors administered powdered horses' teeth. A cold in the head was cured by kissing a mule's nose. Remember that, any of you who have the sniffles; don't reach for Allerest, just look for a friendly mule.

Now imagine, if you will, that into this primitive world where people had little hope of being cured by any other means, came a man who could but speak a word, and the blind could see and the lame walk. No wonder people believed that Jesus was God. Jesus healed people. We all believe that. The question is: Does Jesus still heal people today?

I want to say to you that Jesus still heals people today. The world-famous Mayo Clinic was founded by Dr. Will Mayo and his brother Charles. Dr. Will Mayo once spoke these encouraging words: "I have seen patients that were dead by all standard. We knew they could not live, but I've seen a minister come to the bedside and do something for a patient that I could not, although I had done everything in my professional power. But something touched some mortal spark in that patient, and in defiance of medical sense, that patient lived." Thus spoke Dr. William Mayo. There is evidence that Jesus still heals people today.

As C. S. Lewis once told of a woman he knew whose thigh bone was eaten through with cancer, "It took three people to move her into a bed. The doctors predicted she had only a few months of life; the nurses who knew better predicted a few weeks. A minister came to her bedside, laid hands on her and prayed. A year later, the patient was walking, and the man who took the last x-ray photos of her thigh was saying, "It's miraculous!"

Some of you could undoubtedly share with me stories of people you know who doctors had given up on, but somehow people prayed, and the doctors were proven wrong. It does happen; not always, not even most of the time, but it does happen.

Some people experience healing but cannot believe that God was involved. Don't be surprised if someone responds like that. There may be someone in

this congregation this morning who would respond in much the same way. You may be asking in your heart, if Jesus healed my young boy, why doesn't he heal my nephew, why doesn't he heal my mother of her cancer, why did he allow my dad to have that heart attack? It is a complicated question with no satisfactory answer.

Again, please understand that it is the exception, but not the rule. But there have been too many who have reported that the doctors told them they did not have a chance, and yet they made what can only be called a miraculous recovery. We simply cannot dismiss their testimonies. We know that some miracles could be explained if we knew all the facts. We're not naïve; we know that some healing may grow out of the strong connection between the mind and the body. Some people make themselves sick because of what someone calls "stinking thinking." Why shouldn't other people use healthy thoughts to think themselves to wellness?

Back in 1974, Robert Ader, a psychologist at the University of Rochester, did a brilliant study discovering for the first time the role of the mind in relation to the immune system. He demonstrated what most of us have always felt -- that the condition of the mind and emotions can have a profound effect on the conditions of the body. A new science came into our vocabulary: psychoneuroimmunology -- the mind's effect on the immune system. And we know there is truth in this science.

Some people would contend that this mind/body connection is the explanation of all such healing. They point to how often Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well." And certainly that was part of it. When people believe in Jesus it might very well unlock streams of healing within the body.

That brings me to the real question this morning. What about those people who believe in Jesus whose bodies are not healing? The truth of the matter is that this is more often the case than not. More than simple belief must be at work in cases where healing does occur. Of course, every good doctor will tell you that there are simply things with regard to healing that they do not understand. They have seen people whom they would never expect to leave the hospital to do so. Some of these people have no religion at all, and some of them are miserable human beings, but still they get well. Others were people of glowing optimism with many friends praying for them and caring for them, yet they remained in pain and eventually they died. There is no simple explanation no matter what anyone says.

There's much about healing and faith that we do not understand, but here's what I believe: Whenever you have a need, whatever it may be -- for healing, for a loved one who is going through a difficult time, for guidance in a time of deep uncertainty -- whatever your need is -- take it to God in prayer. If it is truly life shattering, ask others to pray for you as well and then trust God. God does answer prayer. Sometimes it's not exactly how we hoped, sometimes it's not on our timetable, but God does answer prayer. The important thing is to trust God's love for you. If you trust God, everything ultimately will work according to God's plan, and God's plan is always for God's children's good.

“Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” I believe that God still heals people today. Trust him and believe that in all things, even when we may not discern how, God works for our best good.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs