

If only God would heal my eczema, the way Jesus healed the leper... If only God would cast out the evil spirit of dementia from my mother, the way Jesus cast out demons when he wandered around Galilee... If only God would heal all the people suffering with AIDS, the way Jesus healed “all the sick who were brought to him” at Simon’s house... If only God would heal my pain, the way Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law, so I could take care of my family... If only God would take away my granddaughter’s addiction, the way Jesus cleansed the man with the unclean spirit...

In today’s gospel, we hear stories about Jesus healing people who are ill. We can’t hear these stories without wondering, “Why, when we have so many stories of miraculous healing in the New Testament, do we also have our own stories, stories in which healing doesn’t seem to be granted?” Why did my neighbor have a miscarriage? Why did my friend die of a heroin overdose? Why is my uncle going blind? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why does God let bad things happen to good people? Maybe you’ve asked such questions yourself, maybe even this very week.

There’s a whole branch of theology dedicated to exploring these questions. It’s called “theodicy,” spelled t-h-e-o-d-i-c-y, theodicy. It comes from two Greek words: *theos*, which means “God;” and *dike*, which means “justice” or “justify.” Literally, theodicy means “justifying God;” the word was coined by Gottfried Leibniz, a German mathematician and philosopher, in 1710. Dictionary definitions of theodicy include the following: the vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil; an attempt to justify God’s existence in an imperfect world; and an attempt to answer the questions, “Why does God permit the manifestation of evil?” and “If God is good, why is there evil in the world?”

Perhaps you are an expert in theodicy; maybe you ask these sorts of questions every day. Here’s the way that Epicurus asked them 23 centuries ago: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is God able to prevent evil, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is God both able and willing to prevent evil? Then where does evil come from? Or is God neither able nor willing to prevent evil? Then why call God “God”?”

Over the past 2300 years since Epicurus, and probably for hundreds of centuries before that, people who believe in God’s goodness have asked these sorts of questions. I’m not here today to solve this theological problem. Sorry if that disappoints you. Suffice it to say that bad things happen to people, sometimes, regardless of whether they are good some of the time or bad all of the time. When it comes to the topic at hand, some people who are ill are healed physically, and some aren’t. Some people who get sick follow a treatment plan and experience healing; some don’t. Some people take medicine and get better. Some have surgery and recover. Some go to physical therapy and get symptom relief. And some don’t.

In the gospels, as in today’s gospel, we hear stories of healing, accounts in which Jesus heals someone of an illness of body or mind or spirit. Since you and I know people who have not received

healing, how do we hear these stories? What do we learn from them? Primarily, we learn that God cares about the health of God's people, in body, in mind, in spirit. From Jesus, we learn that:

- Jesus heals in many places: in the synagogue, in a home, outside.
- Jesus heals at different times: on the Sabbath, after the Sabbath, in the early morning.
- Jesus heals many different people with whom he has different relationships; he heals strangers, relatives of his friends, lots of people, or one individual at a time.
- Jesus heals people of many different diseases: of unclean spirits or demons, fever, leprosy, and various diseases other diseases. In other stories, Jesus heals people with dropsy (what we would now call edema from congestive heart failure), hemorrhaging, or paralysis.
- Jesus heals when someone cries out for help or begs or kneels; when friends of the person tell Jesus of the illness or bring the person to Jesus; and at Jesus' own initiative.
- Jesus heals by many methods. Sometimes he heals by his word, commanding an unclean spirit to "come out" or a man with leprosy to "be made clean." Sometimes he heals by touching or by reaching for a person's hand or by spitting. Sometimes he combines methods, and sometimes the method of healing is not specified.
- What are the results of healing for the person seeking healing? The man with the unclean spirit convulses and the spirit leaves him; Simon's mother-in-law's fever departs; the leper is made clean; others are "cured" without specific results. In a word, the person is made well, whole.

In summary, Jesus heals in many places, at many times. He heals a variety of people with whom he has different relationships, and he heals people of many different diseases. The impetus for Jesus' healing varies; one asks for himself; others ask on behalf of the person who is ill; or Jesus notices that the person is not well and grants healing. Jesus uses many different methods in healing: he speaks, he spits, he touches, or he stretches out his hands. The bottom line is that, even though the circumstances of healing vary, Jesus desires wholeness, or wellness, for all; he wants everyone to have health in body, mind, and spirit, and he brings healing wherever he goes.

So back to today. While Jesus is not walking around today speaking words of healing or touching those who are ill or lifting up those with mobility issues, Jesus is still healing, even here, even now, although healing might not look the same as it did in the first century. Healing today takes place in different places, at different times, with different people, for different maladies, by different methods, with different results.

Healing looks different today than it did in Jesus' time; let's take a moment to consider the differences between healing then and now. First of all, the worldview of health and illness in Jesus' society was quite different from ours. His contemporaries understood that illness was caused by evil spirits, and they had no concept of DNA or inheritable diseases. We moderns, however, know that the culprit for illness, rather than an evil spirit, is more likely to be a virus or a bacteria or a cancer cell or a chromosomal flaw. In Jesus' day, there was little scientific understanding of illness and healing, whereas we have much more information about health and sickness today.

Second, we have many more tools for healing than Jesus did; you are probably already well-acquainted with what contributes to good health... healthy eating, regular exercise, medication, physical therapy, assistive devices, a positive attitude, deep breathing, meditation, and so forth. Several years

ago, I added marijuana to that list as my father began to experience significant relief from back pain with his prescription.

Third, we have much better access to medical care these days, although far too many in our community and our nation have no more access to health care than did those who sought healing from Jesus; in 2023, over 25 million Americans had no access to health care. We also have many different kinds of health care workers; in our own congregation we have home health care aides, nurses, physician's assistants, doctors, paramedics, and medical records keepers. We also have King of Kings folks in the "Wellness" profession who seek to deepen the mind-body connection: a yoga instructor; a reiki practitioner; a wellness consultant for women; and an expert in mindfulness. All of these folks participate in Jesus' healing ministry; God uses them to bring health and wholeness to themselves and others.

There is one tool for healing that we share in common with our first-century siblings in Christ, however. Can you guess what it is? It's available anytime, anywhere, it doesn't cost anything, and you don't have to be an expert to use it. Judy has a sweatshirt that calls it "the world's best wireless connection." What is it? Prayer. I saved the best healing tool for last!

How do we use the tool of prayer for healing? Unlike Benny Hinn or Oral Roberts, we don't pray prayers demanding that God answer us according to our directions. Rather, following Luther's lead, we simply put ourselves in God's hands and ask for God's help. Luther teaches us that God, who has created us, has given us everything we need, and he encourages us to pray to God about anything and everything that concerns us, just as we would share these concerns with a loving parent.

In the Small Catechism, in his Explanation to the First Article of the Creed, about creation, Luther writes: "I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties... and all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey. This is most certainly true."

Also in the Small Catechism, Luther writes this about the Lord's Prayer: "With these words ("Our Father in heaven"), God wants to attract us, so that we come to believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father." Thus far Luther. To summarize, the God who created us and loves us cares for us in body and mind and spirit, desires health and wholeness for us, and invites us "boldly and with complete confidence" to come to God with concerns about our health.

For Luther this meant that, whenever he prayed for some specific outcome, that, for example, a friend would be healed from a severe melancholy (what we would call depression today) or that a colleague would be delivered from death's door, he would, in the very same prayer, commend that person to God, asking that God's will be done in their life. Note that Luther's concern was not only for healing in body but also for healing in mind and spirit, healing from things which today we would call

depression or suicidal thoughts or addiction. When his daughter, Magdalena, lay dying at the age of thirteen, Luther is reported to have prayed, "I love her very much. But if it is thy will to take her, dear God, I shall be glad to know that she is with thee." Luther was not averse to banging on heaven's door, pleading for healing, but in the end, he always entrusted those for whom he prayed into the care of God, clinging to the promise that the Lord hears our prayers just as a loving parent hears the request of a child and, in the same moment, trusting that God's good will will indeed be done.

Here at King of Kings, at our Evening Prayer service at 7:00 pm on the Fourth Wednesday of each month, we offer prayers for healing with anointing. During the liturgy, we hear a gospel story about healing and then offer individual laying on of hands with anointing and private prayers for healing. We entrust one another to God's care, bringing our concerns to God and, in the same moment, asking that God's will be done. Whether you're in need of healing or not, you're welcome to come!

Almost 35 years ago, I attended a Healing Service on a Monday evening in the seminary chapel. I had recently found out that I was pregnant, and I was feeling very unsettled about the pregnancy, as though something was not right. When I knelt at the altar, a professor asked if I had a particular request for healing. I said, simply, "I need to commit this baby into God's care." The professor made the sign of the cross with oil on my forehead and prayed for God's care for the baby and for God's will to be done in my life. The next day I miscarried.

Sometimes, our prayers "work" in the sense that we get the "results" we want; we get what we ask for; and sometimes they "work" only in God's time or in God's wisdom, like those prayers for my baby at the seminary. But our prayers always bring us into the presence of the loving God who cares for us, no matter what happens, just as a loving parent cares for a beloved child. And prayer always brings us healing, perhaps not in the way we might wish, but always, according to God's will. AMEN.