

Rev. Norman S. Ream
May 5, 1963
Matthew 10: 7-22

"THE HEALING TOUCH"

"Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give." -Matthew 10: 8

On a late winter's evening in 1951, Bob Stout was riding a train in New Jersey. Suddenly, there was a terrible crash. When the smoke had cleared and the damage had been surveyed, it was discovered that 85 people had been killed and 500 injured. Bob Stout was unconscious in a hospital where the medical staff held out little hope of saving his life.

Bob Stout was a member of a Christian church. On the Sunday morning following the accident, his minister led the congregation in prayer for Bob's healing. During the time the congregation was praying for him, Bob opened his eyes for the first time and at that moment began a slow journey toward complete recovery.

In 1950, on Ash Wednesday, Howard McIntyre suffered a heart attack. I was called to the hospital to see him at once for the doctors doubted he could survive for more than a few hours. Howard McIntyre was a member of my church. That night during the Ash Wednesday service, I led the congregation in prayer for Howard, not asking God to perform any miracle, but surrounding Howard with the love and the concern of his friends and fellow church members, and asking that God's perfect will might be done in him. The next morning, to the surprise of his doctor, Howard was better. His heart beat was stronger. He recovered and went back to his wife and two children who needed him badly.

In 1953, Everell Pelton was driving from Green Bay to Neenah. He apparently dozed at the wheel and drove into the rear end of a truck. He was taken to a hospital in Green Bay where again very little hope was held for him. The next day every member of every prayer group in the church to which he belonged, and of which I was privileged to be the pastor, began to pray that God's will might be done in Everell Pelton. Everell Pelton recovered.

In 1956 Eugene Allen contracted poliomyelitis. A few days later, when I was permitted to see him, I found him completely paralysed from the neck down. Three doctors told me he had no chance to live. Again our prayer groups enveloped Gene in an atmosphere of love and concern. Two years later Gene was the treasurer of our church and was working full time at Marathon Corporation.

I could cite many similar cases, and you could in turn tell me of contrary cases, and I could cite some myself, where many wonderful people prayed for someone who was sick and in need, and that someone did not recover. But in every case which I have mentioned, the person who did recover would insist, as they did insist many times, that it was the prayers of their friends and their fellow Christians which saved their lives.

II.

It is not my intent this morning to try to convince you that this kind of prayer will always save the life of a person in need. Many times it does not, and why it does not, is just as much beyond my understanding, as is the reason why sometimes it appears to do so. The ways of God are mysterious indeed. It is rather my intention this morning to talk about the responsibility which we as Christians have toward one another ever to be sensitive, sympathetic, and understanding that we might extend to others the healing touch.

Healing is a part of the historic tradition of the Church. Consider the healing miracles of Jesus. He gave sight to the blind. He cured lepers and epileptics. He made the lame to walk. After having done all this, he turned to his disciples and said to them, "Greater things than I have done, ye shall do." Sending them out on a mission to preach, He said to them, "Heal the sick." They went out and returned to say that they did have power to heal, and reported that even the demons were subject to them.

With the advent of the age of rationalism, the Church, for the most part, relegated healing to the men of science. The Church no longer believed it had power to heal the sick. Today we have given pretty much of a monopoly on healing to the doctors who in turn have told us that a large percentage of the sickness with which they deal is psychosomatic. Those who are sick, in many cases, do not need drugs and operations nearly so much as they need faith and prayer.

Having passed through a period of loss and pain recently, I have come to understand anew the importance of this healing touch which Christians can extend to one another. I have learned how much joy and strength there is in the sympathetic understanding of a friend, in expressions of good-will and love from those who are trying to share another's suffering. Many of you have had this same experience, and you know that there is healing and strength in the love and sympathy and understanding of other people.

A number of years ago, I happened to be a hospital patient, and although I was not seriously ill, I did endure a great deal of pain. A number of ministers, friends of mine, came to see me. Unfortunately, not one of them offered to say a prayer. But one day an eighty-year old member of my church, a man deeply religious, visited with me a few moments and then before leaving, asked if he could share with me a prayer. I don't remember what he said, but I do remember how much the prayer of that dedicated layman meant to me. It gave me new spiritual strength which I am convinced promoted the healing processes of my body. It is this healing touch which is the responsibility of every person who calls himself a follower of Christ.

"We share each other's woes,
Each other's burdens bear,
And often for each other
Flows the sympathizing tear."

If this is missing from any Christian fellowship, then the most essential ingredient of that fellowship is missing.

III.

You may recall the time Jesus healed a man who had for many years lain beside the pool waiting for a miracle to take place. The first thing Jesus asked that man was this: "Do you want to be healed?"

At first hearing it sounds like a silly question. Wouldn't anyone want to be healed? But it is not so foolish for what Jesus was suggesting to this man was that if he really did want to be healed, power for that purpose lay not in a filthy pool of water, but in himself. Said Christ, "Rise, take up your bed and walk."

Incredible as it may seem, disease is often an escape mechanism. A famous surgeon tells of a woman whose case had been diagnosed as inoperable cancer, but who later was informed that it had all been a mistake and that there was no discoverable cancer at all. This woman refused to leave the hospital, and was more upset at being told that she was well than being told that she was dying: "I cannot bear the thought of facing life again," she said.

There are people like that, and to such people the question must be put: "Do you really want to be healed? Do you want to be healed badly enough that you will do all within your own power to make yourself what you ought to be?" Such persons need faith in themselves, and you and I as their friends and fellow Christians are charged with responsibility for helping them discover the powers and potentialities that lie deep within their own selves and upon which they can draw to build stronger, better lives. This, too, is part of the healing touch which the Christian fellowship can and ought to impart.

IV.

But let us think more specifically now about the words of Jesus which are our text: "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give." I never think of this text without thinking of that young minister who was a bit nervous in his new church, and who announcing this text one day twisted it a little so that it came out: "I want to speak about healing the dead, casting out the sick, and raising the devil."

Now, surely, all of us will agree that God is the source of all healing. Whoever performs surgery, prescribes medication, or offers any therapy, is an instrument through whom God works. They are applying the truth of God which is called medical science to the needs of men. All of us in some form have been the recipients of this healing power of God. It has been given to us freely like the rain which falls from heaven, and the sun which warms our bodies on these wonderful spring days. And so Jesus says to those who would follow him, "Freely ye have received, freely give." And we reply, How can we? How can we heal the sick? How can we cleanse foul diseases? How can we raise the dead? How can we cast out ignorance and falsehood? The answer often is: We cannot. We cannot give because we have stopped receiving. Exports must be balanced by imports. We do not know God well enough. We do not understand God well enough. We have not learned how to receive so we have nothing to give to those who look to us for help.

Why have we not received sufficiently? Because we have not asked properly. Jesus was a man of prayer. And if we want to receive power and understanding from God, then we must become a people of prayer, for it is in prayer that a man turns his life into a channel through which God's power may flow.

This was the central secret of Jesus' power. Any measure of success which you and I may have in applying God's power and love to our own problems, or those of our loved ones, must grow out of this understanding and this fellowship. When the disciples could not heal a young epileptic boy, Jesus said in effect, "Your prayer life is not strong enough to cure this patient." Jesus asked over and over again of those whom he would heal, "Do you have faith that I can heal you? Do you believe?" As Jesus put it, "To him who believes, all things are possible." And we can turn it around and say, "to him who does not believe, nothing will be possible." Our faith grows out of our fellowship with God and man. We cannot give until we have learned how to receive.

Faith is believing that God's power is available to us to sustain us in time of weakness and suffering. It is being convinced that we cannot escape the love of God even though we may suffer and know tragedy and die. Real faith demands that we live in a continual consciousness of God's presence, and that we strive to become aware of him every moment of life. When God thus becomes real to us, we shall be able to draw from him divine resources to accomplish more than we ever dreamed was possible.

Shortly before he died, Charles P. Steinmetz said:

"Some day the scientists of the world will turn their laboratories over to the study of God, and prayer, and the spiritual forces...when this day comes, the world will see more advancement in one generation than it has in the past four generations."

Why wait for the scientists? We do not need to wait for them. There is power, there is strength, there is vitality, available to us now. Let us take God at his word. Let us make ourselves available to the ministrations of his spirit, and walk out of our darkness into the light of his goodness and power.