

A Balm in Gilead?

sermon digest

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Jeremiah 8:20-9:1; Matthew 4:23-25; 8:14-17

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“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” Jeremiah’s inquiry is rhetorical. The healing balm of Gilead was an aromatic resin that provided temporary relief from pain and a strong aroma that covered the acrid smell of rotting flesh, but it was hardly a wonder drug to heal the wound. The balm of Gilead was more of a placebo than a cure, and I suspect that the Prophet was fully aware of the cynical tone of his question. Also, the question grows out of despair rather than hope. It is a lament over the spiritual sickness of the nation that promises to be terminal.

Jeremiah was not known for his bright optimism. He has been called “the weeping prophet.” He offers prophetic grief for the terminal condition of the nation. The expression of deep emotion has touched the pain of the ages. The African-American spiritual emerged from the agony of slavery with the gospel of Christ to answer Jeremiah: Yes! “There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.” Theologian Delores Williams recalls growing up in the black church in the segregated South: “I heard this text repeated over and over again. By the time I reached the seventh grade, by grandparents had provided me with a Christian black-cultural interpretation. . . . that black people, in bondage, have lived a history of lamentation. So we continuously ask God and the church (in all its varieties) why freedom has not been restored to us” (*The Living Pulpit*, Oct-Dec, 2000, p. 6). Out of the horrors of slavery God’s people cry out for something more than rhetoric. Like the balm of Gilead, words may soothe and cover our pain, but they do not heal our disease.

Does faith matter? What is the use of praying for the sick, the dying, and the bereaved? I recall the chuckle that emerged in the newspapers when HIPAA (health insurance portability and accountability act) became law in 1996. Insurance companies were prying into personal health information to keep from insuring people who really need insurance. So release of private health information by medical people became a major issue. The media had a ball with the question of churches publicly announcing health issues or praying in specific for people in health crisis. The joke was not only on the law; it was on the church and all who pray for the sick.

We cannot begin to understand the Jesus of the Gospels apart from his work. The miracles of the New Testament are not optional; they are central to the identity of the Christ. The healing ministry of Jesus is more than a demonstration of the power of God at work in Christ. Healing is a big part of the gospel message.

Matthew sets the stage for the ministry of Jesus, who came teaching, preaching, and healing. Douglas Hare compares Matthew with Mark and notes that Matthew’s Jesus is always the teacher whose deeds are servant to his word. Hare imagines a conversation in which Matthew disagrees with Mark, “Miracles do not certify teaching; it is the other way around! In themselves miracles are ambiguous events. It is the authenticity of Jesus’ teaching that renders his miracles significant. He is the Messiah of Word before he is Messiah of Deed” (*Interpretation*, Matthew, p. 32).

The healing ministry of Jesus carries a message about the nature of our disease and the compassion of Christ for all human suffering. In Christ, there is a balm in Gilead. Opening blind eyes or lifting a lame man to his feet were acts of healing that worked toward the transformation of a life, but the message of the gospel is always bigger than that. The gospel message addresses the eternal dimension of life in relation with the eternal God. Physical and spiritual suffering are two sides of the same question, not independent and separate questions of life.

People of faith are subject to exploitation. The dissonant note here is sounded by a surge of faith healers in the modern world. The exploitation of suffering by fraudulent healers has been well-documented. Dr. William Nolen investigated twenty-three cases of healing by the famous Katherine Kuhlman. None of the cases proved to be cures. In one case, a woman with spinal cancer who on stage had removed her back brace and tossed it aside died three months later directly related to a collapsed vertebrae and the cancer for which Kuhlman had claimed a cure. Peter Popoff pretended to get messages from above when he was really getting messages from his wife through the miracle of a radio transmitter. Mrs. Popoff got her information from cards that the people filled out as they entered the faith-healing exhibition. Marjoe Gortner was raised by evangelist parents to be a

con man. He began plying his trade at the age of three and continued duping the desperate for more than two decades until finally he confessed all in a documentary film.

We have every right to raise our defenses against exploitation.

C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain* observed that the great religions were “first preached and long practiced in a world without chloroform.” When the only available healing was faith healing, the clinical role of the church in life was central to existence. However, in a few short centuries the center of healing shifted from the church to the hospital, and the healing ministry of Jesus and the early church was set aside as an artifact of an antiquated understanding of the world. Thus, the epileptic boy needed drugs or surgery rather than exorcism of his demons, and the man born blind needed cornea transplants or cataract surgery rather than saliva mud pies from Jesus.

Second-guessing the Gospels, providing modern explanations for ancient diseases and cures, was a common practice until interpreters finally came to the realization that we cannot possibly know enough about these stories to reduce them to fact and to sanitize them with scientific explanations. God does not fit so well under our microscopes or into our computers. To speak of using faith or prayer like drugs or surgery has a taint of manipulation that does not fit with my understanding of the Lord of the universe, and the sword cuts two ways. Magic is the manipulation of divine power for human utility; and much of what has played as “faith healing” on the stage of history has been magic, the pretense of manipulating God for human purpose. On the other hand, science cynics tend to view religion like a vending machine. If you deposit a coin of prayer, you should get the exact candy you ordered. If not, prayer like all of religion is a fraud. Pastor theologian Paul Scherer belittled magical religion under the comment, “When all else fails, try God,” to which Scherer replied, “Why not try aspirin?”

The new atheist Christopher Hitchens died of esophageal cancer in 2011. When family, friends, and strangers offered their prayers, he quipped that they should also kill a goat. Until the end, Hitchens remained an atheist critical of those who manipulate the sick and the dying, yet he mellowed a bit, finally recognizing that people of faith were also people of good will.

There is a Balm in Gilead. Following the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus plunges into a series of healing events, and Matthew alone offers the explanatory citation from Isaiah: “he took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” For decades I read passages like that as statements of the vicarious suffering of Jesus. He bore on the cross the sin of the world. He was smitten by God and afflicted, punished for my iniquities, for my failures. But Matthew points to a slightly different understanding. The Messiah of God came to take our sickness into his own life and experience. The healing mission of Jesus was more than demonstration of divine power and more than acts of eradicating human disease. We have heard the shout of victory that smallpox is no longer a threat in the modern world and that polio is on the threshold of total eradication. Matthew suggests a cost in the act of healing we often overlook. Jesus was not a charlatan who caused people to toss away their crutches. Jesus was involved in the suffering of the world. He took on the burden of human illness in the message that God suffers with us. Jesus did not heal everyone, and he did not heal anyone to the point of immunity from death, but he healed as an act of involvement in human suffering.

In the mid 1990's, Billy Williams was accepted into a medical trial at Harvard for prostate cancer that required his taking residence in Boston for several weeks. Billy was an educator. Between radiology treatments he attended lectures on lifestyles practices that aid healing. There he discovered the world of Dr. Herbert Benson. The Harvard Medical School professor was heavily involved in research on the effect of religious faith in the process of healing. Billy came home with a copy of Benson's book *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief*. Benson does not suggest turning away from science and medicine to visit faith healers, but he does recognize the importance and impact of prayer and meditation to supplement to work of drugs and surgery. This is not about the magic of manipulating God. It is about the integrity of the human person. We are more than bodies that grow old and grow sick and die. Persons made in the image of God have been created with a spiritual capacity that transcends our very bodies. In the spirit of Christ, until we are whole, we are really never well. The healing of the whole person reaches beyond the disease of the moment to the eternal healing of the soul.