

Testimonials Are Us

A Prayer for Wholeness

Sunday, February 22nd, Centenary did something it doesn't do every worship service. As Pastor Willard explains, "we did something in our Sunday morning worship service that has not happened for a while, we gathered together to pray specifically for healing." Over the years and in some churches such moments during worship have been labeled, laying on of hands, or healing services, and have not always been understood or used as God intended.

Willard continues, "For some of us, this was something of a new concept. Praying for healing has – in some Christian circles - been ceded to the Charismatic/Pentecostal movement. Others of us have been turned off to the idea because of what we perceive to be abuses by 'faith healers' and televangelists.

"*The United Methodist Book of Worship* helps us reclaim some of what it means to pray for God's healing touch. In part it reads:

The root of the word healing in New Testament Greek, sozo, is the same as that of salvation and wholeness. Spiritual healing is God's work of offering persons balance, harmony, and wholeness of body, mind, spirit, and relationships through confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

All healing is of God. The Church's healing ministry in no way detracts from the gifts God gives through medicine and psychotherapy. It is no substitute for either medicine or the proper care of one's health. Rather, it adds to our total resources for wholeness.

Healing is not magic, but underlying it is the great mystery of God's love. Those who minister spiritual healing are channels of God's love. Although no one can predict what will happen in a given instance, many marvelous healings have taken place.

God does not promise that we shall be spared suffering but does promise to be with us in our suffering. Trusting that promise, we are enabled to recognize God's sustaining presence in pain, sickness, injury, and estrangement.

Anointing the forehead with oil is a sign act invoking the healing love of God. The oil points beyond itself and those doing the anointing to the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the presence of the healing Christ, who is God's Anointed One."

As Pastor Willard reminded us, what we were doing came straight out of scripture. The scripture Willard read opening the "Prayers of the People" segment of the service was **James 5:13-16** (using CEB translation here).

¹³ If any of you are suffering, they should pray. If any of you are happy, they should sing.

¹⁴ If any of you are sick, they should call for the elders of the church, and the elders should pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ Prayer that comes from faith will heal the sick, for the Lord will restore them to health. And if they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve.

The impetus for the healing service was the diagnosis that Centenary's new lay leader, Mark Burks, had received a few days before, cancer of the brain. The tumor that doctors had removed February 3rd was malignant and the prognosis had given Mark, his family, including his church family, heavy hearts. Willard, seeking the will of the Great Physician, asked Mark if he could have a healing service "next Sunday". It was a question Mark and his wife Patty were not sure how to answer.

Mark, who grew up in Centenary, had been overwhelmed by the outpouring of love from his Centenary family the past 20 days especially. Acts of love from Jennifer and Bill Decker who came immediately to the ER when Mark was first rushed by ambulance to the hospital illustrated the compassion that was being text messaged on the family's cell phones as Centenary members were receiving the word to pray for Mark. Clyde Tharp was by Mark's side the first thing the next morning when Mark barely knew his own name, but recognized Clyde's compassion immediately. Clyde, a former lay leader, held Mark's hand as he entreated God on Mark's behalf. There were so many who had visited, sent cards, delivered food, emailed and called; all with the promise to lift Mark and family in prayer.

Willard's offer of a public prayer as a healing service seemed contrary to what Mark had learned in Sunday School. He thought of Matthew 6 and Christ's admonishment of the hypocrites. **Matthew 6 (CEB)**

6 "Be careful that you don't practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. . . .⁵ "When you pray, don't be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. ⁶ But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.⁷ "When you pray, don't pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do. They think that by saying many words they'll be heard. ⁸ Don't be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask.

Mark said he was concerned that people might think him pretentious to agree to such attention. He wanted the prayer to be for all who needed healing. Mark, who was seeking through his personal prayers the courage and faith to accept God's Will, wanted those praying for him to also seek God's Will in this battle against the malignancy. "I prayed about it and talked to Patty to know what she wanted, too," said Mark. "I felt like I needed to do this (the healing service) and I wanted to do this for everyone."

When James, the brother of Jesus, wrote, "If any of you are suffering," he was speaking to everyone who was suffering. Whether it is from illness, pain, grief, affliction of the heart or the spirit, James wanted them to know there was a healing power we could call upon. Mark wanted this service for himself, and for all who were struggling, suffering, in pain for whatever the cause.

Pastor Willard, following scripture, asked Rev. Kevin Burney, a Methodist church elder, to share in the healing service and the anointing of oil on Mark. As the service began, Willard instructed that Mark and his family should come to the alter as the congregation sang the last verse of "Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus" and anyone else who would like to participate in the service to follow them. As the small crowd, who had braved the winter elements, sang the last stanza, a beautiful experience for everyone began to unfold.

*I'm so glad I learned to trust Thee,
Precious Jesus, Savior, Friend;
And I know that Thou art with me,
Wilt be with me to the end.*

Refrain:

*Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him!
How I've proved Him o'er and o'er;
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!
Oh, for grace to trust Him more!*

As Mark knelt at the altar, his daughter, Mary, hugging her daddy's arm lovingly joined him. Patty and daughter Abby and others in the family stood right behind him. What happened next was a manifestation of

Centenary's compassionate heart as members filled the alter area, the center aisle and clasped hands and shoulders to spiritually hug Mark and each other. As Kevin and Willard, quietly whispered to Mark, "wish you could see this", they, too, felt the love and the strength of the presence of God. The Holy Spirit filled the room as a flood of light came through the Christ window and shone across the believers. It was a spiritual moment as Pastor Willard lifted Mark and all present up in prayer. Afterwards, Willard would reflect, "This meaningful experience had a great impact upon many of us."

