

Connecting with God: healing touch

Feb. 12

Last week I visited Martha Davenport, a former member who's under hospice care at Christopher House. She wasn't able to speak much but I asked her if she wanted me to anoint her with oil and she nodded yes. So I opened the little vial I keep in my purse and made the sign of cross on her forehead with oil and said a blessing.

That's something that Christians have been doing for almost 2000 years. We see in the NT letter of James instructions for church leaders to anoint the sick and pray for them. In the OT anointing with oil was used for many things: for consecrating leaders, for blessing a worship space, for honoring guests, for preparing a body for burial but especially for anointing the sick. And did you know that in the book of Exodus the recipe for anointing oil is revealed by God to Moses? cinnamon, myrrh, cassia, olive oil. Rachel Held Evans comments "we know now what the creator knew then: that the olfactory nerve is connected to the amygdala, the part of the brain associated with memory and emotion." That's why a particular smell can call up a memory so clearly. It's as if God wanted people to remember the scent of holiness and healing.

But of course, there's nothing magical about the oil—it's simply a carrier of God's grace and it's transmitted by human touch, which is so powerful. Just having a hand to hold, someone to lean on, can make such a difference when we're suffering. Doctors, nurses, physical and psychological therapists are healers too; they are part of God's plan for healing. All these healing arts have something in common: a relationship between a person who's suffering, a person who wants to help and God who is the source of all healing.

And healing is not just about physical illness. In our scripture reading today, the prophet Jeremiah is lamenting the brokenness of his people, caught up in idolatry and self-destructive ways. "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn and dismay has taken hold of me." And then he asks "Is there no balm in Gilead?" The city of Gilead was famous for this medicinal ointment used for many ailments, so there's some irony here. Is there no balm for my people even in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Where is healing for my people, for their self-inflicted wounds?

He's right isn't he? Our brokenness can be emotional and spiritual rather than physical. We can be sick with sin, with addictions, self-deceptions, guilt. We may need a balm for bitter memories or broken relationships. Sometimes our communities are broken by hatred and fear. Anything that separates us from God and one another is in need of healing.

But sadly, church people are often afraid of the subject of healing. I think that's because we all remember times when we prayed so hard for people who were sick and they died anyway. We prayed for a marriage and it ended in divorce anyway; we prayed for a baby and no baby came. And that raises terrible questions—did God say no, and why would God say no to something good or to someone so faithful? So sometimes we turn away from those who are suffering because we don't know how to fix their pain and we don't know how to explain what happened.

Rachel Held Evans says that, so often, churches want to see results. "Convinced that the gospel is a product we have to sell...we like our people to function as walking advertisements, happy and put-together..., proof that this Jesus stuff works." Doubt, failure, sadness call that into question, and the ones who suffer feel shut out instead of receiving grace.

Our problem is that we confuse healing with curing, the removal of the disease or the pain. We don't know why some illnesses are cured and others aren't. My belief is that God created a world with freedom built into it, even though the results of that freedom are sometimes tragic and heart-breaking to God as well as to us. We just don't have all the answers. But instead of trying to explain what we DON'T know, we can turn to what we DO know and that is the heart of God. What we do know is that God is always at work healing, that is bringing wholeness and meaning and peace to whatever situation we face.

Brene Brown says, "I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away...But church isn't like an epidural it's like a midwife...I thought faith would say, "I'll take away the pain and discomfort," but what it ended up saying was, "I'll sit with you through it." That's such a powerful image to me of the ministry of healing: a midwife heaping you through a birth. Can you think of time when someone has

helped you through a time when you struggled with grief or illness or brokenness in your life—not taking away the pain but helping you carry it?

That's an understanding of healing that the church desperately needs —because I have seen what happens when we misunderstand healing. I've mentioned before that my daughter is a nurse; a few months ago, she told me about an experience she had. She usually works in Cardiac ICU but her unit had fewer patients than usual so she was floated to another unit, where she walked into a tragic situation. One of her patients was a woman in early 30's who had just discovered she had cancer but it had already metastasized everywhere and now she was dying. The doctors had explained that there was nothing else to do for her. Her husband, children, relatives had gathered in the room; she was unconscious. Then one of the relatives began to insist that the family should all pray for a miracle. "We believe in God, we believe in miracles. Let's all pray right now for God to save her."

The prayers went on and on, everyone was crying, but no one was paying much attention to the woman's 14 year old daughter. So Lauren sat and talked with her, answered some of her questions, like "where do people go when they die?" She invited the girl to help wash her mother's face and hands and put lotion on her, trying to give her a way to do something loving for her mother. The woman died, a tragic situation. But it was made worse, to my mind, by the fact that her relatives were so determined to have a miracle that they missed the chance to say goodbye in a loving and peaceful way.

Death can be a healing too, when we trust that "the love of God is more permanent than the grave." As Psalm 130 says, "our hope is in God, for with the Lord there is steadfast love and redemption."

That redemption is seen in a community Rachel Held Evans describes in her book. It's called Thistle Farms located in Tennessee, run by an Episcopal priest named Becca Stevens. Thistle Farms "trains and employs women who are recovering from abuse, prostitution, addiction, sex trafficking, imprisonment and life on the streets. As the women heal through the therapy and community offered by the program, they also offer healing to others through the bath and body products they make from essential oils and sell in stores and online. Lotions, body balm, candles. They make anointing oil for churches and invite parishioners to

make their own blends. It's a ministry that heals those who are making the oils because, as the Bible tells us over and over, we are healed as we learn to show love to others.

Thistle Farms is a paradigm for what Jesus calls the church to be: a community of struggling and imperfect people holding each other up, walking together seeking that beautiful scent that comes from God.

After I close with prayer I want to invite you to come forward, if you feel moved, to be anointed with oil and to receive a blessing. You're welcome to kneel at the rail or return to your seat. If you don't choose to come forward, that's fine. Nick will be leading us in some meditative songs.

Let us pray.