

Spiritual Healing

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Dedication

This Meditation is in honor of the life-long ministry of the Reverend Laurens (Larry) Hall, rector of St. John the Divine Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas. I have known Larry since he graduated from seminary and was ordained, and came to work for me as my Assistant when I was Rector at Christ Episcopal Church in San Antonio, Texas.

I have had the opportunity and privilege of witnessing Larry's faithful ministry as a priest over the last forty years. Larry has been a faithful servant of the Lord for these decades. He is a close and dear friend, a partner in ministry, and a blessing to all who know him.

One

Prayer?

I graduated from Seminary and was ordained over 50 years ago. I knew well the Old and New Testaments, Church history, systematic theology. But about prayer, I knew next to nothing.

I believed that when someone got sick, they were going to get well . . . or not! But prayer was not going to change it. I was a product of Western rationalism, “With *Man*, all things are possible.” The idea that God could use my prayer as a channel of healing did not make sense to me.

Our business, as the Church, was the spiritual side of life; get people to be good, to get them into Heaven. Healing was the business of doctors or hospitals. Besides, I did not want for people to get too much hope from me that God was going to heal them, because if He didn't, then they might be mad at God and might be mad at ME! Now, prayer was good to give us good feelings and make us feel close

to God—but I could not see my prayer helping anyone else.

Two

Don't Expect, Don't Receive

In my first church, a small church, St. James, Lake City, Florida, I did have an active pastoral ministry. There was a big Veterans' Hospital two blocks away from the church, and I visited it two to three times a week. The patients were all veterans from the World Wars and Korea. I prayed for them what I now call "weasel word prayers": "Lord, in all conditions, we know that You are doing for this man better things than we can desire or pray for." Thinking back now, I wonder why those men did not rise up and say to me, "Preacher, this may be better than *YOU* can desire or pray for, but *I* want to get well and go home!"

But what was wrong was that I was not asking God to do anything, because I did not expect anything like a healing or a miracle, and they did not happen!

Three

The Call

Near the end of my first year at St. James', it was time for the annual Diocesan Clergy Conference, and the announcement caused an uproar among the clergy—the Bishop had invited a WOMAN, Agnes Sanford, to lead it. Now, this was before the ordination of women to the ministry, or even women lay readers. No women participated in church services, no little girls served as acolytes. And Agnes Sanford had never been to Seminary—what did SHE know that WE clergy did not know? The arrogance of us clergy was awful. And our stern Bishop made our attendance compulsory. So we had to listen to her for two full days!

Four

Sent from God

I will never forget that conference room and sixty of us clergy sitting smugly listening to her. She simply read Bible passages to us—she pointed out that two thirds of the incidents in Jesus’ ministry were Jesus healing someone—doing mighty miracles. She reminded us that Jesus said to his followers, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, then you can tell a mountain to move, and it will!” “Hey,” she asked us, “are you moving any mountains these days? Jesus said you could do it. Have you tried it, or maybe Jesus was wrong? Did he mean it? He said you could with just a bit of faith. And Jesus said to his followers, “The works that I do, you shall do also, if you believe in my name. And greater works you shall do.” And Agnes went on, “Every time Jesus sent his followers out to preach the Gospel, he, in the same breath, said ‘. . . AND heal the sick and suffering.’”

Agnes then said to us, “I know you gentlemen are preaching the Gospel, and probably doing it well, but are you laying your hands on the sick and suffering in the way Jesus did, and are they getting healed?”

My friends, have you ever seen sixty clergy in a room, squirming, wiggling in our chairs, shifting this way and that? We were mighty uncomfortable—who did she think she was, talking to us like that? I’ll tell you who she was—she was sent from God.

And Agnes went on, reciting a number of the familiar healing stories: Jairus’ daughter, when she was at the point of death, whom Jesus healed; the woman with the hemorrhage, who touched the hem of Jesus’ robe and was healed; the Centurion with the sick servant, who said to Jesus, “I am not worthy for you to come into my house, but just say the word here, and he, back there, will be healed,” to which Jesus responded, “I have not seen faith like this in all Israel.”

And she recited to us the great verse from James’ Epistle, “If any of you is sick, let him call for the Elders of the Church and let

them pray over him, and the prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up, and if he committed sins, he will be forgiven.”

Finally, Agnes Sanford concluded by saying, “Gentlemen, if you are not going to believe the promises of God, given to you by Jesus Christ in the Gospels, are you sure you’re not in the wrong line of work?”

WOW—she let us have it! She then said, “I have two hours before I have to leave for the airport and I will give 10 minutes to the first twelve of you who will sign up on that pad on the table.” Now, I was not the *first* in line, but I was the third! I knew of a painful conflict going on within a family for four years, which I brought to her. After she heard the story, she said to me, “I know Jesus wants to end that conflict,” and she put her hands on my head and prayed a powerful prayer. I was overwhelmed. But that conflict in the family was resolved in two weeks.

That afternoon leaving Clergy Conference, I had a long drive back home, and I did some serious praying: “Lord, I do not under-

stand most of what I heard these two days, but it's all right there in the Bible. So Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.”

Five

The First Healing

Shortly after that conference, I went to the local hospital to visit a man named Owen Dial, who was critically ill with kidney disease and looked as if he would not survive. I prayed and prayed for his healing, that God would restore him to good health—and Owen *did* get well, that very night. None of the doctors or nurses could explain what had happened—they were stunned and bewildered. I came back to the hospital the next morning, and word had gotten around; I heard the head nurse say about me, “*He’s* the one who did it—that preacher healed Owen.” But I had not healed Owen—God had done that, God had healed Owen. To everyone’s amazement, Owen walked out of that hospital. He moved back to Orlando where he had lived before he became ill, coming back to the hospital every month only for treatments to keep him healthy.

And I was saying, “Lord, Lord, it works,
it works!”

Six

Another Healing

Not long after that, I was visiting in the hospital again, going to see a young man named Billy Orr, whose family I knew well. Billy had rabies, and he was very, very sick. He also was angry, and as bitter as he could be at the unfairness of being struck down by illness as a young man. Billy would not speak to me when I visited him.

As I walked into Billy's room this time, I wondered what I would say to him and his family. But having heard all I did from Agnes Sanford, I prayed a mighty prayer for Billy's healing, asking God to heal him completely and restore him to health. I assured Billy's parents that God would heal Billy. Then I left.

The next day, I went back to the hospital to see Billy and his family. As I walked down the corridor, a nurse said to me, "You'd better hurry, Billy is about to die." And Billy did die. As I walked toward that hospital room, I was stricken—I had no idea what I was going to

say to Billy's mother and father, who had heard my prayer for healing the day before. I pleaded silently, "Lord, I told Billy's parents You would heal him. Now he has died. They are going to hate You and hate me both." Now there are not many times that I will say that the Lord has spoken to me so clearly, but He spoke to me clearly in that instant. He said to me, "Ben, you tend to your work and I will tend to mine."

As soon as I entered Billy's room, where his mother and father remained, his mother came forward to me and said, "If I live a million years, I will never be able to thank you enough for the prayer that you said yesterday. Yesterday, Billy was angry and bitter towards the world. But after that prayer, he changed. Before he died, he was happy, and at peace, and even laughed again. Thank you so much." Thanks be to God—prayer had worked. Billy had been healed.

And I learned in that moment that God has different ways of healing.

Seven

All Things Are Possible—With God

That marked a dramatic change in my pastoral ministry. I still don't understand so much, but I'm willing to pray with confidence, even foolhardiness and boldness, knowing that God's will is for health and wholeness—that He wants to heal you and me and our loved ones. There is much we don't know, but we need to assume He is against sickness and suffering—that He's on the side of the doctors and nurses and those doing medical research—that they are doing God's will. Jesus healed all who came to him or were brought to him. And Jesus never said to them, "Sorry about your case, you're incurable, or terminal." He never said to the blind and lame, "God is testing you." He just cured them. We need to assume that all things are possible with God, and trust Him.

Eight

The Face of Hope

Two years later, I had moved to Jacksonville, and there I met a doctor named Kenny Morris—a Dean of Surgery at the local hospital, and the Senior Warden of my church. Walking down the corridor of the hospital one day, I ran into Kenny and, apparently, I had a sad, long face. I had been to see Mary, a patient who was very ill, and it looked like she was not going to live much longer. Kenny said to me, “Wait a minute, Ben, some of the best doctors in this hospital and I are doing everything we can to help Mary get well. There is much we do not know, but God works beyond our understanding; your job is to come to this hospital in the name of the Lord, and give us Hope. So if all you’re going to do is walk around with a sad face, get out of my hospital!”

Trust in God. He is not bound by our still limited medical knowledge. And never convey to anyone that it is his or her lack of

faith that is the reason they are not healed. Jesus, with all his faith, could do no mighty works in Nazareth, because of the unbelief throughout that whole community.

So hold fast to faith, and hold fast to hope.

Nine

Unexplained Miracles

I heard a story from Emily Neal, a pioneer in the field of Christian Spiritual Healing. She was called one day to the hospital by a family to pray for an elderly man who was in a coma and critically ill. When she arrived, the family had gathered to make burial plans. Emily was tempted to pray not for healing, but rather to commit the man to the Lord. But she instead prayed for a mighty healing miracle for him.

A few minutes after Emily left, that eighty-three year old man woke up. He left the hospital three days later, and lived three more years. Now, a miracle also occurred in that man's family. That family had long before drifted away from church; but after that healing, the family came back to church and became active, church-going Christians . . . after they had seen the power of Emily's prayer.

I have seen other miracles that defy explanation. A six year old boy, Rusty, who was

blind from birth, was taken to a healing mission I attended. There, Emily Neal prayed for a healing miracle for that child. I was on the other side of Rusty, and I recall praying, “Lord, please give this young boy a miracle.” But He did not heal Rusty’s sight then—not then. And we and Rusty were disappointed.

Six weeks later, as my wife, Joanne, and my girls and I were at Sunday dinner, our telephone rang. I answered it, and it was Rusty’s mother, yelling, “He can see! He can see!” And Rusty *could* see! Rusty got sight.

No one can explain how that happened. But it did.

Ten

The Greatest Miracle of All

But I can believe that God has the answer, and I can believe that just maybe, the greatest miracle of all is to see a family pray fervently for a miracle for a loved one, and NOT get it, and yet NOT lose faith in God, but come out with stronger faith than ever. Yes—come out closer to God—the greatest miracle of all.

Yes, pray for healing, ask for and expect a miracle. But with an attitude of trust in God that “having God in my life is even more important than my being healed physically.” All of us are in God’s hands, always.

Finally, always remember that God has in store for all of us who have given our lives to Him, a future, a future that is more radiant, more dazzling, more glorious, than anything that you and I can possibly imagine. You can bet your life on that!

Yes, you can bet your life on that one!

AMEN.

A Prayer for Healing

Lord God, each one of us has someone whom we love, a friend or family member, or maybe ourselves, who is sick, and suffering, and in need of healing.

We now hold up these Your servants, and we ask You to restore each one of them to perfect health and happiness.

We know, Blessed Lord, that each of these Your servants is precious to You—even more precious to You than to us. We also fully believe that Your Holy Will for them is to be healed, and that all things are possible with You.

Your Blessed Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, came into the world and died on the cross for our salvation, which includes being healed, being made whole.

Even as each person who came or was brought to Jesus was fully healed, we ask for that same healing now. We ask for that same wonderful, even miraculous healing for these Your servants whom we are holding up, and

for whom we pray, to the glory and praise of
Your Holy Name.

AMEN.

Maurice M. (“Ben”) Benitez, D.D., was Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas from 1980 until 1995. Prior to his election as Bishop, he served as the Rector of three congregations: St. John the Divine Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas, Christ Episcopal Church in San Antonio, Texas, and Grace Episcopal Church in Ocala, Florida; and as Vicar of St. James Episcopal Church in Lake City Florida. His late wife, Joanne, was his partner in ministry throughout their 63-year marriage.

Ben is a graduate of the United States Military Academy and the University of the South Episcopal School of Theology. Before attending seminary, he was a fighter pilot and test pilot in the United States Air Force.

Ben wishes to thank his beloved daughters for their assistance and support in this publication.