

Anointing the Sick

John 5:2-9 Mark 2:1-12

The Fourth Sunday of Lent ~ March 22, 2020 ~The Sacred Act of Anointing

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They had never seen anything like that. Have you? Perhaps you have. Have you lived a story of healing, or a miracle of medicine? If so, I bet you have remembered it. We pray for miracles. We do not always receive them.

I've told some of you this story before. How, when my brother was still a young man and father, he came down with melanoma cancer, detected by a small mole on his back. Of course, he had all the treatments. Then, for seven years it lived insidiously within his body before it reemerged on the brain. I was a young pastor then, fresh out of seminary, and my father, who was not an overtly religious man, asked me: "Ann, I have prayed and prayed to God to let me change places with John. Why won't God let me, a man who is far from perfect and has lived many days and years, why won't God take me, and let your brother live?"

I, who grieved with my father, tried to think of the answers to suffering I had learned in seminary. I was too inexperienced to have learned yet how to say, "I don't know. I don't know, Dad, why some people suffer."

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There is a lot of suffering going on right now. Physical, emotional, mental, spiritual. As people of faith, our role is not to give answers, but to stand with and be with. Stand with anyone who suffers today.

I'm curious about these different stories of suffering. In this first, here is a man who has no one. We don't know why. But he has no one to carry him to the water. No one to advocate for him, or to help him in any way. Until Jesus comes to this place of huge suffering. Think of it, five porches filled with people who are ill and need help. Jesus lays his eyes on this man. The story does not tell us that everyone is healed. But he is. This one who had no one before, this man walks away.

Now what a contrast. In the next story, the paralytic man is surrounded by those who care. Some are part of the crowd, four carry the pallet on which he lies. He is not made responsible for bringing himself to Jesus. My friends, sometimes we have no faith in ourselves. We need others to have faith for us. The role of the others was not to cure their friend, but to care for him and to carry him into the healing presence of Christ. There are many ways we can care, and one of these is to pray.

We are can be part of Jesus' healing ministry. I invite you to consider someone you know personally, or someone you know about, who is suffering today. Be specific. Can you think of someone who needs the balm of healing or help? Someone who is struggling, in pain? What does this person need to experience wholeness and fullness of life? How is the path to healing

obstructed in some way? What gets in the way? Imagine if you can carry this person to Christ, to the source of health, what would that be like? How do you get through the crowd and dig through the layers of roofing, that is, all those barriers to well-being? For when we are suffering, there can be many, many hindrances and layers that frustrate our healing. So many things can keep us from vigor and freedom and joy.

Yes, it is true that Jesus did not heal every one, like my brother. We are certain, however, that Jesus used his power to heal, never to harm. The most harm he did was to turn over a few tables at the temple, preventing money-lenders from abusing those who came to worship. It is also true that Jesus shows us the power of friendship. When we become, as Fred Rogers teaches, when we become one of the helpers, suffering may be alleviated sooner. No one should wait for thirty-eight years to get the attention of one who cares. All of us are able to bring a friend or stranger to the pool of refreshment. And let God do his work.

The sacred act of anointing happens every time we care.

I believe God does not want anyone to suffer. So if you are suffering, come to the pool of life-giving water. Do not judge or condemn yourself. Accept your limitations. Receive the friendship of Christ and his ever-present Spirit, known to us through all those imperfect helpers who seek healing and new life.