

## God Always Heals but Does Not Always Cure The Search for Healing in the Episcopal Church

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THE FIRST HEALING SERVICE I attended during my fieldwork was at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Boston's South End. A new resident to that neighborhood, I discovered it one Sunday morning, and it surrounded me with an immediate and fierce welcome. Several weeks into September, St. Stephen's held a mass for healing. Armed with a notebook, I found myself in the pews with, it seemed, the entire congregation. More than forty people attended on this Wednesday evening. When the vicar and assistant minister invited people to the altar for the laying on of hands, I intended to sit in the pews and observe. However, every person in attendance stood up and formed a long line. I realized how foolish I would look if I refused to participate. As I stood before the altar, I found myself deeply touched by the caring gaze of the two ministers, whom I barely knew. I softly described the move I had just made from Montana and my fears about starting graduate school. They put their hands on my head and shoulders, and prayed out loud for me for several moments. I felt a certain weary relief, and I left the church feeling much more at home.

About a week later, I spoke to Tim Crellin, the vicar at St. Stephen's, who gave me more information about the church's decision to resume a regular healing service. In the midst of our discussion, I asked if he knew of any other Episcopal healing services. The only one he knew about was held at Trinity Church, and he suggested that I go there. I was disappointed but made plans to attend the one he mentioned.

I need not have wasted any time being disappointed. Healing work is alive and well in the Episcopal Church. I have discovered a wide range of practices, and even beliefs, within the church, from services of healing that occur once per year to charismatic healing teams that offer healing prayer several times each week. I have attended fourteen different Episcopal services for healing. These varied in form; some offered laying on of hands as part of a regular mass, and others created a special mass

with a focus on healing. Seven churches I attended offer healing once per week, while four offer healing monthly. St. Stephen's has a healing service three times each year. And two churches offer annual healing services with a particular focus, one for survivors of abuse and one for those who have experienced "loss of life in the womb." I also interviewed five ordained people and five laypeople about their healing work.

One of the reasons that the opportunities for research around healing were so rich is that there is both a sacrament and a service utilized for healing in the Episcopal Church. The sacrament of anointing can be offered to anyone who is ill. The recipient is anointed with holy oil on the forehead, "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." Prayers and laying on of hands accompany the anointing. The hands are often laid on the head, shoulders, or arms while prayers are said. The sacrament of anointing can be offered individually or as part of a larger healing service. During most of the services I participated in, the actual ritual involved several steps. First, the priest invited those of us who wanted anointing and/or laying on of hands to the altar. When I walked to the altar, the priest or lay minister asked what I would like to pray for and whether or not I would like to be anointed. When the anointing was complete, the minister or team laid hands on me, and one person prayed out loud. If there was more than one person, sometimes they took turns praying. Both the prayers and touch offered varied. Prayers were extemporaneous in almost every case, and sometimes they were long and intimate, and other times they were brief and somewhat impersonal. In some churches, the touch offered was close to an embrace, and in other churches it involved only a light touch to the top of the head.

The Episcopal Church also has a special service called "A Public Service of Healing." This service is a celebration of the Eucharist and includes readings and prayers specifically geared toward healing, as

well as a time for anointing and laying on of hands. Many of the services I attended reflected this basic structure.

While doing this fieldwork, I discovered a tension that pervades the Episcopal Church's discussion of healing. It is a tension between an understanding of "curing," meaning the end of disease or illness, and of "healing," meaning an experience of transformation or growth as a result of living with an illness. This distinction illuminates the challenges of any religion: What is the right relationship to the divine? What do leaders and participants expect will happen as a result of prayer? I began with a very simple question: Can anyone expect that their cancer or Alzheimer's will miraculously disappear as a result of a healing service? In many cases, people in the Episcopal Church said "no." The Reverend William Barnwell of Trinity Church, put it this way: "The Lord promises healing, not curing."<sup>1</sup>

Many priests I spoke to reiterated a theme of healing into wholeness. This requires an examination of the rich complexity of the whole person and the ways in which one's illness contributes to growth, not only for oneself, but also for those around you. The Reverend Jon Strand of St. Paul's in Natick told me that illness can bring a person into closer companionship with God. It is a chance to heal a rift with God as one struggles about whether or not God cares about one during an illness. He emphasized that healing is a means to transform one's relationship to God. Healing prayer can be part of this communication, as it is "God's love conveyed through touch."<sup>2</sup> Mr. Barnwell made a distinction between curing and what he called "deep healing." He defined deep healing as something that "makes you feel right with yourself." Quoting Thomas Merton, he said that the focus is on becoming not more spiritual but more yourself.<sup>3</sup>

The Reverend Martha Giltinan of Christ Church of Hamilton and Wenham explained that healing happens not only for the person who is ill, but also in the person's family and community. Even a horrible experience of cancer can lead to new relationships. Ms. Giltinan made a clear distinction between healing and curing, saying that God always heals but does not always cure. The presenting illness brings us to prayer but, in spiritual terms, the illness is nothing.<sup>4</sup>

Even in light of the comforting words that every illness has spiritual meaning, and can bring us closer to God, there remains a real question about the experience of suffering for the ill person. During a day-long conference in February 2001 at Episcopal Divinity School, entitled "Partners in Healing:

Spiritual and Medical Perspectives on Health and Illness in Communities of Faith," the Right Reverend Steven Charleston offered an opening meditation on healing. A woman in the audience asked, pointedly, if God allowed millions of people to die during the Holocaust, how could God possibly intervene on behalf of the healing of a single person? Bishop Charleston replied that it is a mystery. He did not attempt to explain this mystery, but simply acknowledged that, while many people in the world have suffered senselessly, he has experienced tremendous healing in the lives of those around him.<sup>5</sup>

Bishop Charleston also spoke directly to the particular qualities of the Episcopal Church that challenge notions of miraculous cures. Mentioning the Church's famous reserve, he told a story about praying at the bedside of a woman who was very ill. During his prayers, she opened her eyes and looked toward him. Later, she told him that she had been looking at the four angels standing behind him. Bishop Charleston raised his hands toward the audience and asked, "What do you do with this story in the Episcopal Church?" Everyone in the room burst into laughter, but the question remains. The bishop concluded by stating, "We do not need to be timid in telling our stories of healing."<sup>6</sup>

Other Episcopalians I spoke to were not the least bit timid. During one of my interviews, an Episcopal priest shared with me a story of miraculous healing. A woman in her congregation had a very rare form of cancer. Without the knowledge of this woman, the priest and a friend decided to offer long periods of prayer for her while they were on a trip of several days. When they returned, the priest called the woman's family to plan a visit to her in the hospital, where she was scheduled to have the tumor removed. She was told that the surgery had been canceled; the tumor had disappeared. The priest believes this woman experienced a miracle as a result of their healing prayer, and she wanted to celebrate this within the congregation. The woman did not believe that she had been cured through prayer and did not want to discuss or celebrate the incident.

This description of a miraculous cure sits in contrast to the belief that God neither promises nor offers the end of illness, but instead guarantees some experience of healing. The contemplation of the miraculous was included in a discussion I had at an Episcopal church that is part of the charismatic renewal. I attended three different services at Christ Church of Hamilton and Wenham, and I spoke to the Reverend Jurgen Lias, the pastor of the church,

as well as to the church's healing team. Although Christ Church is out of the Boston and Cambridge area, I was referred to Mr. Liias by three different people as someone with a deep commitment to healing. Christ Church holds weekly healing services on Wednesday morning, where a team of lay ministers, as well as a priest, offer laying on of hands and healing prayer. They offer the same in a side chapel during the Sunday morning services. The healing teams pray in a way that I have not seen in other churches: one person on the team prays for the person coming for healing. The second person prays for the other member of the team. When I spoke with Mr. Liias following the service, he explained to me that the charismatic renewal within the Episcopal Church began in the 1970s and 1980s and attempts to bring healing into the mainstream. It is an offshoot of the Pentecostal Church, a massive Christian movement attempting to rediscover the charisms of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

One of the interesting elements of the charismatic services I attended was the emphasis on the reality of healing and the imminence of curing. Mr. Liias outlined for me his four principals of healing: 1) Jesus healed; 2) Jesus healed as a sign of the kingdom; 3) Jesus healed in the power of the spirit; and 4) Jesus sends others to heal in his name, to heal with the same power.<sup>8</sup> The healing team that I spoke with at Christ Church was in agreement with this. I happened to interview them in January 2001, when Elizabeth Price, a healer, was in residence. She and the rest of the team had been meeting with people individually for healing prayer. They describe their work as "intuitive, cooperative," rather than as the work of will power. They understand that healing is not magic, but a confirmation for the sick person and the healer that the living God is within that person. Elizabeth Price emphasized that healing is a process. She has seen some people heal in a dramatic way, but, generally, God focuses on one area of a person's life, then another, then another. She said, "To grow up in Christ is life-long." She also emphasized the relationship between faith and healing,

saying that even Jesus could not heal when people did not have faith.<sup>9</sup>

The complexity of these subtle distinctions was frequently cited by the Episcopalians I spoke with, and questions around the nature of healing and curing continue to be discussed within the Church. In April 2001, I was fortunate to be able to attend the service during Holy Week in which the oil used for baptism and for healing was blessed. This is the oil that will be used for the rest of the year. At the luncheon afterward, I spoke to several priests about this study and about healing work in their churches. One priest made note of a recent resurgence in the interest in healing, but noted a paradoxical difficulty in her own parish in getting people to come to their healing service. Another priest spoke of her initial fear that a healing ministry would not fit into the culture of her church. Still another priest shared that the weekly healing service at her church has consistent membership and is going quite well. Perhaps this tableful of priests is the best reflection of the enormous complexity around healing in the Episcopal Church.

#### Notes

1. The Reverend William Barnwell, telephone interview with author, 20 November 2000.

2. The Reverend Mark Strand, telephone interview with author, 30 November 2000.

3. Barnwell, telephone interview.

4. The Reverend Martha Giltinan, interview by author, South Hamilton, Mass., 24 January 2001.

5. The Right Reverend Steven Charleston, "Partners in Healing," opening meditation at the conference "Partners in Healing: Spiritual and Medical Perspectives on Health and Illness in Communities of Faith," Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass., 24 February 2001.

6. Ibid.

7. The Reverend Jurgen Liias, interview by author, South Hamilton, Mass., 24 January 2001.

8. Ibid.

9. Elizabeth Price, interview by author, South Hamilton, Mass., 24 January 2001.