



**A SERVICE OF HEALING (FOR THOSE SUFFERING
EMOTIONAL DISTRESS, GRIEF, DIVORCE, AND PHYSICAL
AILMENTS)**

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. History

Healing is an important aspect of the Christian faith. Jesus was sent by God to heal a sin-sick world, and in the Bible there are numerous examples of healing including the events referenced by the scripture for this lectionary commentary. As in biblical antiquity, today people suffer from

a variety of ailments and are in need of healing. God is the source of all healing, whether it is obtained through medicine and modern technology, or obtained through the loving touch of a human hand.

A Service of Healing acknowledges the healing power of God and becomes a vehicle to facilitate healing in our lives. In a Service of Healing, individuals and community call for God's intervention in the mental, emotional, physical, or spiritual distress that can plague the peace of the human soul. Participants acknowledge the compassion of Christ who "takes away the sins of the world," and recognize themselves as agents of healing. Healing services may include a variety of creative expressions such as dramatizing, singing, dancing, playing instruments, reading Scripture, preaching, praying, and anointing with oil. The presentation of a Service of Healing is a visible witness of God's presence and power operating in our lives.

Services of healing are not a new phenomenon. Such services evolved from the early Christian Church where, for example, it was customary for the elders of the Church to lay hands on the sick and anoint them with oil (James 5:14). In the Roman Catholic Church, the anointing of the sick is one of seven sacraments observed by the church. In the sixteenth century, during Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation and John Calvin's development of the Reformed Tradition, new theological perspectives were developed. Yet, the belief in prayer and healing remained for all Christians.

When enslaved African people came to the shores of America, from the 15th to the 19th century, they took their indigenous faith traditions and experience of God, blended this knowledge with the European Protestant Christianity taught by slave masters and white churches, and created powerful worship services that included a time of drumming, dancing, singing, shouting, and praying for healing from the violence and vicious atrocities suffered at the hands of their masters.¹ This helped strengthen the African slaves' resolve to deal with the dirt cast upon them. The powerful effects of such services became known to white slave masters who feared that such experiences might lead slaves to not only pray for healing, but to work to realize a future free from the undeserved suffering perpetuated upon them.² Because of the threat of rebellion, many white masters forbid African slaves to worship outside of their watchful eye. Thus, the invisible church was born and services of healing continued.³

Throughout the 20th century the Black Church was a healing haven, an oasis from the storms of life, a place where the rejected were accepted and the humanity of the disenfranchised was honored and respected.⁴ Today services of healing continue to provide welcome relief to those under great stress. Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, continue to participate in these special times, acknowledging that God, our divine companion along the way, continues to bless us with the marvel of God's healing presence.

II. Word Etymology

The term used for "heal" in our Matthean Scripture (8:7, 13) comes from the Greek word "therapeuō," which means "to heal, cure or restore to health." In turn, "therapeuō" comes from the root word "therapōn," which means servant or attendant. From "therapōn" we get the Latin

word “therapīa,” from which the English term “therapy” is derived.⁵ From such definitions we may reason that services of healing are therapeutic for those who participate in them.

The Scripture states that Jesus “took up our infirmities” (Matthew 8:17). The term used for “took” in the Greek is “lambanō,” which means “to take in order to carry away without the notion of violence.”⁶ This phrase points to the reality of God’s participation in our suffering and God’s ability to cure our ailments.

Finally, it is important to note that Jesus demonstrates the power to heal by his word (Matthew 8:16). The Greek term for word is “logos.” Logos is defined as: “sayings of God”; “decree, mandate or order” of the moral precepts given by God; “doctrine” or “teaching.”⁷ Jesus is also the logos. When presenting a service of healing, the word of Scripture as well as the words shared by worshippers can be sources of healing.

III. Cultural Response

My earliest recollection of understanding the concept of God’s healing power came with my maternal grandmother, Jessica Willie Mae Pope. My grandfather was an associate pastor at the Church of Christ Holiness in Berkeley, California, and my grandmother was well suited to play her role as a pastor’s wife. I noticed that people would come to receive counsel from my grandmother and ask for prayers for the various concerns that confronted them. I admired the respect and admiration others held for her and I certainly felt the same. Grandmother was near perfect to me. She was my spiritual mentor. She shared stories about the goodness of the Lord, and she emphasized the importance of having a personal relationship with Christ. I was impressed by how she not only confessed faith in Christ, but also endeavored to practice her beliefs in daily living.

Some time in my early adolescence, Grandmother shared with me that she had cataracts on both eyes and that she would be going for surgery to have them removed. I did not understand how serious the surgery was at the time. Today, we have laser surgery and the removal of a cataract is most often an outpatient surgery. But back in the early ‘70s, cataract surgery was no small feat. I remember going to see my grandmother after surgery. She had white linen pads covering both eyes and stayed in the hospital some days before she was released. As her eyes began to heal she had to wear black-rimmed glasses with lenses as thick as the bottom of a coke bottle. It was after the surgery that she told me she was in danger of losing her sight. She said that at the hospital, the doctors would take off the bandages, and when they noted the shape and condition of her eyes, they were surprised that she could see. Grandmother told me that she felt the operation was truly a miracle of God. It was clear that her trust was in God who worked through the hands of the surgeons. As she spoke with me concerning the goodness of God and God’s healing power, I began to reason that if God could heal Grandmother, God could heal me and others. This experience taught me some important lessons about healing that I later further developed and use in ministry. Below are my suggestions for presenting services of healing that come out of my Christian experience.

First, it is important to talk about the healing power of Jesus with believers, especially our children and youth. They, as well as adults, should be made aware of the responsibility and

privilege that believers have to pray for themselves and others. It is also important to involve children and youth in services of healing. They are growing up in a global, unstable, technological world where religion is often not made relevant to their lives. It is up to the Church to help youth “connect the dots” and apply their faith. My grandmother’s testimony about God’s healing power and prayer helped shaped my faith. I came to know that prayer makes a difference.

Second, within a service of healing it is helpful to provide a time for testimony and listening to the concerns of others. The centurion in our Scripture is able to seek help for his servant because of his awareness of the servant’s need. I grew much in my understanding of just how significant my grandmother’s surgery was by listening to her testimony. It is important for the African American community to be aware of the many needs of those around us so that we may intercede appropriately, whether through prayer or some other form of healing help.

Third, as the church engages in a service of healing it is also important to explain to our congregations and communities that healing happens in different ways. Because God works in mysterious ways and has wonders to perform, it is important to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in prayer. The centurion was open to the way in which Jesus could heal his servant. Although Jesus was willing to come to the centurion’s home, the centurion also knew that Jesus need only say a word, and his servant would be healed. The centurion demonstrates an important truth: It is not the strength of our will and volition, but rather our conviction and complete trust in Jesus Christ that results in healing and brings us peace.

There was an incident in a church I served that involved a very dedicated and zealous man of faith who was praying along with other persons for a fellow church member. During an informal service of prayer, a group of church members prayed with fervor and fire and he was convinced that the church member who was ill would triumph over the illness. Needless to say this “prayer warrior” was devastated when the church member died. He spoke with me about the situation, for I too had prayed for healing and he wondered how I was fairing. From this event and many others, I shared with the congregation the importance of being open to how God chooses to work in healing matters and to trust God always for healing. The death of our church member did not mean he was not healed. God promises abundant life to those who trust in Jesus, whether it is on this side of heaven or beyond. We must be open to how God responds to our requests for healing.

Fourth, merely holding a service of healing is important in teaching the community to look towards heaven for spiritual strength and fortitude. No matter how far we may progress, no matter how great we may advance in knowledge, we are still children of God and in need of a right relationship with our Creator and with each other. As the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once stated, “Science gives man knowledge . . . religion [more precisely faith] gives man wisdom . . .”⁸ The church is called to bear witness to the One who is able to keep us from falling and to help reconcile humanity to God and to each other.

Fifth, in a service of healing it is important to express compassion towards all those who suffer. We must be careful to be inclusive in our outreach and practice of prayer. Sometimes the church commits the error of exclusivity and we reject or refuse to be reconciled with those whom we consider outsiders. In our Scripture the centurion who calls upon Jesus for help is an outsider

(Matthew 8:5-13); he is not a Jew, he is not a part of the temple or congregation. Our African ancestors were considered outsiders when they arrived on the shores of North America. However, Jesus responded to their needs, just as he did to the centurion in our Scripture.

The church is challenged to reconcile and become a healing presence with people we consider outsiders today. Examples of such groups may be those who suffer from HIV/AIDS or GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender) persons or those who are “differently abled.” They are worthy of our prayers and compassion and the healing touch of Jesus. Jesus took up our infirmities and carried our diseases. Jesus got involved in the suffering of others and in so doing he removed their pain and healed them. His involvement with those rejected by others unleashed a moral power and spiritual energy that helped to heal, not only those who were suffering, but also those who knew about the suffering but did nothing to alleviate it. Through his presence and proclamation Jesus demonstrated God’s love and mercy to those in need. So too, the church is called to be a presence in the community and to be an agent of healing in the world. A service of healing can be a powerful witness to Christ’s love and concern for all humankind.

Finally, it is appropriate for a service of healing to include an offering or the acknowledgment of gifts that alleviate suffering. Often churches respond to the suffering of others by collecting items, sending a financial donation, or sending workers to help alleviate suffering. As the church endeavors to assist in making people whole it is important to acknowledge the different gifts that can help create wholeness.

IV. Stories and Illustrations

(A) During the modern civil rights movement the energy and spiritual support of African American churches who linked faith with social justice helped the freedom fighters move forward. Reflecting on the movement, Coretta Scott King expressed her belief that prayer was a critical turning point for the African American freedom struggle. Her husband, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was known to be a man of prayer and through both personal and corporate services of healing, Dr. King and others received the courage and conviction to continue to fight for civil rights in difficult days.⁹

(B) When my daughter, the Reverend Eustacia Moffett-Marshall, was in labor with our first grandchild, she began to experience some unexpected complications. The doctor came to speak with her and her husband, Reverend Toure Marshall. The physician was calm and compassionate, professional and assuring, and he was a Christian. He explained to Eustacia and Toure what was happening in detail and made them aware that he would try one more procedure, but if he did not see the results he was expecting, he would recommend a cesarean section. As it turns out, he did not get the results he wanted. He entered the room again and explained the benefits and dangers of having a cesarean section. Eustacia’s eyes revealed her anxiety and concern. The doctor asked her, “Are you nervous?” She was honest. She replied, “Yes.” The doctor responded, “I’m not.” Her nervousness subsided after the doctor spoke those words to her. And with a quiet, calm assurance he whisked her into the operating room and minutes later delivered a healthy baby boy, Jeremiah Toure! That is how God acts with us when it comes to healing. We can be calm and confident knowing that God is able to perform the work needed to make us well.

(C) In the midst of a Watch Night service on December 31, 2010 at the C. N. Jenkins Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, Lester B. Taylor, a 60-year-old security guard, was quiet. This was strange because Lester was known for his energetic praise, and just moments before he had been standing on his feet shouting, “Jesus! Jesus!” Those around him knew that something was wrong. As it turns out, he was in full cardiac arrest. His new bride of seven months was in the kitchen preparing food. Someone in the congregation rushed to the kitchen to inquire if Mr. Taylor was diabetic. His wife told them “No” and began to make her way to the sanctuary vestibule where her husband was lying on the floor. Inside the service the church began to pray as someone from the congregation administered CPR. When the paramedics arrived, a faint but irregular heartbeat was felt. They cut off his clothes and used their defibrillator. It was a miracle that he survived. Taylor later learned that his heart had completely stopped for a good length of time. The doctors could not explain the heart stoppage. The American Heart Association estimates that more than 95 percent of cardiac arrest victims die before reaching a hospital. Taylor credits his survival to the power of prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit who so arranged it that he would be in church with certain medical professionals to help him through the ordeal.¹⁰

V. Songs That Speak to the Moment

Richard Smallwood’s song “Healing” seeks to encourage those who are suffering. The point of the song is to remind people that healing is available through Jesus Christ. At the end of the song he includes the words, “There is a balm in Gilead.” The concept of a balm in Gilead is presented in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 8, verse 22. Gilead was known for its fragrances and healing herbs. Yet, given the plight of the Hebrew people and the suffering they endured during the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah asked the question, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” Believers in Christ answered the question in the affirmative: “Jesus is the balm.” Jesus is the physician who is present with those who are hurting and he is the one who is able to heal our wounds.

Healing

Don’t be discouraged
Joy comes in the morning
Know that God is nigh
Stand still and look up
God is going to show up
He is standing by

There’s healing for your sorrow
Healing for your pain
Healing for your spirit
There’s shelter from the rain

Lord send the healing
For this we know

There is a balm in Gilead
For there's a balm in Gilead
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the soul
Healing for the soul.¹¹

“The Potter’s House,” written by Walter Hawkins, is another song of encouragement for people who are experiencing difficulty and is therefore an appropriate choice for a service of healing. Whether one is experiencing divorce, unemployment, illness, or another disappointment, the point of the song is to remind us that God is like a potter, patiently shaping a people for God’s glory. The scriptural text that accompanies this song is also taken from the book of Jeremiah, chapter 18. When a potter finds a lump in the vessel, sometimes the potter may choose to strike it down and reshape it. This is what God does in our lives. God is patient and corrects those whom God loves so that our sin and shame, our disappointments and failures become the foundation for our success.

The Potter’s House

In case you have fallen by the wayside of life;
dreams and visions shattered, you’re all broken inside.
You don’t have to stay in the shape that you’re in;
the potter wants to put you back together again,
oh, the potter wants to put you back together again.

[Verse 2:]

In case your situation has turned upside down,
and all that you’ve accomplished is now on the ground.
You don’t have to stay in the shape that you’re in;
the Potter wants to put you back together again,
oh, the Potter wants to put you back together again.

[Chorus:]

You who are broken, stop by the Potter’s house.
You who need mending, stop by the Potter’s house;
give Him the fragments of your broken life,
my friend, the Potter wants to put you back together again,
oh, the Potter wants to put you back together again

[Vamp:]

Joy in the Potter’s house.

Peace in the Potter’s house.

Love in the Potter’s house.

There is salvation in the Potter's house.

There is healing in the Potter's house.

There is deliverance in the Potter's house.

You'll find everything you need in the Potter's house.

[Ending:]

The Potter wants to put you back together again,
oh, the Potter wants to put you back together again.¹²

“Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior” by Fannie Crosby reminds us that our hope is in Jesus Christ. He is our comfort, the One who can dispense grace and mercy for our wounded, broken spirit. As he calls upon others, we can trust that he will hear our humble cry and meet us with mercy. This song is helpful for a service of healing and is unique because it acknowledges God's intervention in the lives of others, as well as the petitioner.

Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior

Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
hear my humble cry;
while on others thou art calling,
do not pass me by.

Refrain:

Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry;
while on others thou art calling,
do not pass me by.

Let me at thy throne of mercy
find a sweet relief,
kneeling there in deep contrition,
help my unbelief.
(Refrain)

Trusting only in thy merit,
would I seek thy face;
heal my wounded, broken spirit,
save me by thy grace.
(Refrain)

Thou the spring of all my comfort,
more than life to me,
whom have I on earth beside thee?

Whom in heaven but thee?
(Refrain)¹³

In the next song the concept of a Balm in Gilead is presented again. This time in a traditional African American Spiritual, whose authorship is unknown. We are reminded of the love God shows to humanity in sending Christ and are called to rely on this love and share it with others who are in need of healing. Used in a service of healing, this song stresses the responsibility of participants in the faith community to share the healing love of God with others.

There Is a Balm in Gilead

Refrain:

There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.

Refrain

Don't ever be discouraged,
For Jesus is your friend;
And if you lack for knowledge,
He'll ne'er refuse to lend.

Refrain

If you cannot preach like Peter,
If you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus,
And say, "He died for all!"

Refrain¹⁴

My final selection, "Come, Ye Disconsolate" (stanzas 1 and 2 by Thomas More and stanza 3 by Thomas Hastings), is a hymn of the church and especially appropriate to sing at a service of healing. It points the disconsolate towards heaven and reminds us that as we grieve over our situations, we do not do so as people without hope, for earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.

Come, Ye Disconsolate

Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish—
Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel;
Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish:
Earth has no sorrow that heav'n cannot heal.

Joy of the desolate, light of the straying,
Hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure!
Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying,
“Earth has no sorrow that heav'n cannot cure.”

Here see the Bread of Life, see waters flowing
Forth from the throne of God, pure from above;
Come to the feast of love—come, ever knowing
Earth has no sorrow but heav'n can remove.¹⁵

VI. Creating a Memorable Learning Moment

It is important to be led by the Holy Spirit in the midst of worship, including a service of healing. I can remember my first funeral as an ordained pastor. The man I buried was a giant in the eyes of the congregation and had served the church faithfully for years. The Sunday before he died he was determined to serve as worship leader, even though his health was poor. At the end of the service the Holy Spirit spoke to me and I felt led to lead the congregation in saying a special prayer for him. I struggled with the concept of another prayer in the service. I was a young 27-year-old woman having just begun as the new pastor and I wanted to be a good Presbyterian pastor and do things “decently and in order.” Moreover, the congregation had already included prayer for the man in the midst of the worship service and so I felt strange about praying again. As I struggled with my thoughts, it seemed as though the Holy Spirit lifted me up out of my chair and before I realized it, I was telling the church that I felt led to pray again for our ailing worship leader. He looked at me a little strange, but I went to him and gently laid my hands upon him. I led the church in prayer, thanking God for his life and his work and asking for God's healing power. I was so glad that we had this corporate time together, for the next morning I received word of his death. The congregation was comforted in the fact that before he died, we were led to pray for this member who meant so much to them.

At Saint James Presbyterian Church where I now serve, we instituted Quarterly Prayer and Healing Worship Services. These services are conducted on the fifth Sundays in the evening by the church's prayer team. The team strives to create a warm and inviting atmosphere for prayer and personal reflection. The lights in the sanctuary are dimmed and candles lit on the communion table and side windows of the sanctuary.

Depending on your environment, you may use other ideas to make your worship space intimate and welcoming. In Sacred Space: A Hands-On Guide to Creating Multisensory Worship Experiences for Youth Ministry, authors Dan Kimball and Lilly Lewin provide several suggestions for creating an atmosphere for prayer.¹⁶ Although designed for youth, the

suggestions can be meaningful for all believers and especially helpful for intergenerational congregations who seek to include youth in services of healing.

The order of worship in our prayer and healing service is simple. It begins with a call to worship that emphasizes prayer. An opening congregational song is sung. After the opening song persons on the worship team recite Scripture that pertains to the areas of prayer that address the preselected theme for the service. Prayer and healing themes vary with each service. Some have emphasized prayer for people suffering from cancer, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and HIV/AIDS. The team has also held prayer and healing services for the bereaved, the unemployed, families, and relationships. They have led the congregation in prayer for the church and the world including victims of Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Haiti, and other tragedies. On one occasion some of our local politicians joined us during election time and we prayed for leadership in the city.

After a Scripture is read and a concern is presented, the congregation is invited to come forward for personal prayer and for the laying on of hands and the anointing with oil by elders stationed in the front of the sanctuary. Congregants are also given the option to remain alone in prayer, or to form small groups of prayer within the pews. While the congregation prays, the praise team plays and sings softly. A time for personal sharing or testimony is also included in the service, often after the prayer time. Finally, as a means of expressing gratitude to God for healing, baskets are left at the altar where worshippers can contribute a financial gift towards the work of the church.

On one occasion a dancer ministered during the prayer and healing service. She carried a very light scarf and shared with the congregation that God uses the ministry of dance to heal people. She went further to explain to the congregation that she would be moving around the sanctuary and if it was alright with the worshippers, she would gently touch them with her scarf. She proceeded to do so. One member who was operating the audio ministry shared with me that after the dancer touched her, her aching knee ceased to hurt.

I am constantly amazed at the spiritual energy and presence of peace in these services of healing. I have listened to the testimony of those who participate in these special times and I know that God honors us with God's grace and healing presence during our prayer and healing services.

As pastor I participate in the service by offering prayer for the people. I also serve as a resource for the prayer team as they plan the services. Reading about worship and viewing sample prayer and healing worship services are helpful. One book I recommend for African American worship is Melva Costen's African American Christian Worship.¹⁷ An audio resource I recommend that you view is the Nat'l Day of Prayer for the African American and African Family-2011.wmv. YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DY_mfFm4Gw

Notes

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