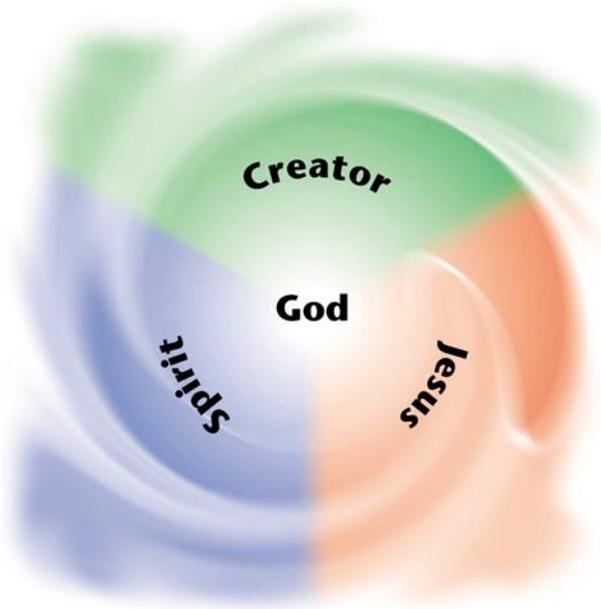


Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

May 28, 2019

Three weeks ago this afternoon, as I lay on a stretcher in the ER in Portland, one of the physicians came to my bed with an important question. "We have to ask you this," she said. "If we lose you this afternoon, do you want to be resuscitated?" I was not expecting the question.

"I'm not afraid to die," I replied, "but I wasn't planning to take that journey this afternoon. If you can keep me alive, please do!" And with that conversation, I began to think a little harder about the idea of "healing."



Before I go farther, I need to offer some context for these thoughts. German theologian Christian Schwarz has pointed out that Christians tend to come in three broad varieties.¹ Those Christians whose experience is largely in the liturgical or "mainline" churches tend to focus on God as Father/Creator and are often most interested in the concepts of justice and creation care.

Those Christians whose experience is largely in "evangelical" churches tend to focus on God as Savior/Redeemer and are often most interested in the concepts of evangelism and redemption. And those Christians whose experience is largely in "Pentecostal" churches tend to focus on God as Spirit/Deliverer and are often most interested in the concepts of healing and spiritual warfare.

Schwarz notes that, like any generalization, this is over-simple, and he also points out that the farther any of these three gets from the burning Center of God's Being, the more polarized we tend to become. The closer we live to the burning Center, the more alike we become.

I say all this to say that what I'm going to say about prayer and healing comes from the perspective of the "evangelical" tradition for the most part. If persons from the "creation" or "Pentecostal" traditions wrote on the same topic, they'd most likely approach it differently.

You've heard me say before that "we all have to die from something." So far as we know, in all of human history, only two humans have not experienced death: Enoch and Elijah. Apart from those two, the death rate is 100%.

¹ There are many other schema that might be used. To offer a few examples, the Myers-Briggs Temperament Indicator (MBTI) divides humans into sixteen personality types. James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* organizes human "faithing" into six stages. And the ancient enneagram organizes human faithing into nine categories.

If I interpret the data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) correctly, more than 92% of us in the United States will die from some sort of disease, and there is little way to know beforehand whether any given illness will be our ticket to Glory. (Were it not for antibiotics, of course, very few of us would be alive at this moment.)

There are some who believe that it is God’s will for all illnesses to be healed, not just in the Life to Come, but in this life, in the ordinary sense of healing. It does not seem to me that this perspective is consistent with life as we live it, or with the overall teaching of Scripture.

Jill and I spent several hours the other night watching a documentary about “faith healing.” Toward the end of the film, the commentator pointed out that one of the persons who had been lifted up as an example of such healing early in the film had, by the time the film was completed, died. We all do.

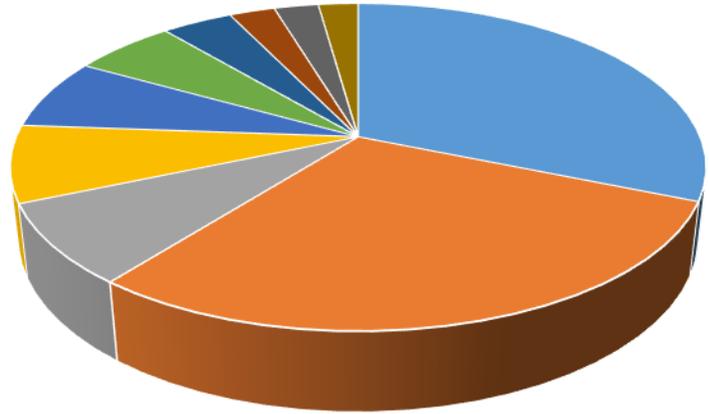
The Bible has an interesting verse about Elisha, successor to Elijah, and who did rather more miracles than Elijah, including healing and raising the dead. We’re told that “*Now Elisha had been suffering from the illness from which he died*” (2 Kings 13:14). No matter who we are, we humans all die, and we mostly die from sickness and disease.

The apostle Paul healed many people in his ministry, including raising people from the dead; yet he told Timothy that “*I left Trophimus sick in Miletus*” (2 Timothy 4:20). If it is God’s purpose for all sickness to be healed in the ordinary sense, in this life, why was Trophimus still sick?

I could name quite a few pastors in this area besides myself who are currently dealing with cancer, and from a human perspective, some of us are going to die from those cancers, and that pretty soon. I have been very blessed that the side effects of my own treatment have been fairly small thus far; but how about those persons for whom the side-effects are perfectly horrible? What message of healing would you give to them?

I could take you to a respiratory hospital in another city where every single patient in that large hospital has a tracheotomy and will take every breath that remains to them—

U.S. Causes of Death, 2016



- Diseases of heart
- Malignant neoplasms
- Unintentional injuries
- Chronic lower respiratory diseases^{1/,2/}
- Cerebrovascular diseases
- Alzheimer's disease
- Diabetes mellitus^{3/}
- Influenza and pneumonia^{2/}
- Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome and nephrosis^{3/}
- Suicide

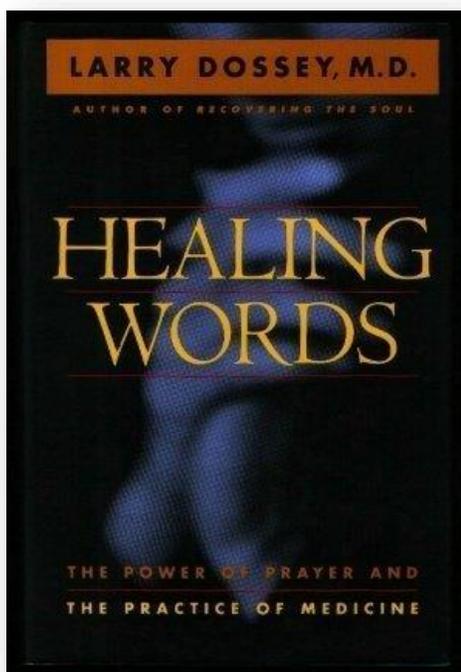
Diseases of heart	635,260
Malignant neoplasms	598,038
Unintentional injuries	161,374
Chronic lower respiratory diseases ^{1/,2/}	154,596
Cerebrovascular diseases	142,142
Alzheimer's disease	116,103
Diabetes mellitus ^{3/}	80,058
Influenza and pneumonia ^{2/}	51,537
Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome and nephrosis ^{3/}	50,046
Suicide	44,965

sometimes for *years*—through a respirator. Many of them are comatose, or nearly so. What would you say to them or to their families about healing?

I got a long message yesterday from a young pastor friend who lives with deep and unending grief because one of their children, now twelve years old, has profound disabilities and requires medication that costs \$800,000 a month (that's what he said) in order to stay alive. What would you say to him about healing?

I do not contest the fact that miraculous healing does occur, though I am often unpersuaded about particular occurrences. But Jesus did not promise us physical healing in this life. He promised us persecution, suffering . . . and glory in the Life to Come. **For those who are in Christ, every illness is in fact healed; but for many that healing is received in the Life to Come.**

When it comes to praying for healing, the Bible does encourage us to do this. I pray such prayers all the time, and I am very, very grateful for your prayers for me. I attribute my relatively mild chemotherapy experience precisely to God's mercy in response to those prayers. At the same time, it seems to me that with respect to the matter of healing, we are frequently in some danger of telling the Creator how to manage the universe, rather than simply showing up for duty.



I've been following the research on "healing prayer" off and on for more than fifty years. One of the more interesting research reports I've read was *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, by Larry Dossey, M.D.²

Dr. Dossey, former Chief of Staff of Humana Medical City Dallas, has provided a meta-analysis of empirical research on prayer, and his conclusions have attracted wide attention over the years.³ As one result of his research, Dossey reported that "I decided that not to employ prayer with my patients was the equivalent of deliberately withholding a potent drug or surgical procedure" (p. xviii).

As I have already suggested, Dossey also points out that "Sickly saints and healthy sinners show us that there is no invariable, linear, one-to-one relationship between one's level of spiritual attainment and the degree of one's physical health" (p. 15).

² Larry Dossey, M.D. *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993). All page numbers refer to this book.

³ The book is replete with tables and citations of experiments, including a meta-analysis of 309 English-language studies in which experiments were conducted by sixty-two investigators, involving over 50,000 subjects, who participated in nearly two million trials. The findings were as follows:

- Thirty percent of the studies produced statistically significant results (where five percent was expected by chance). The odds of this happening by chance are approximately one in 1,024.
- The results could not be explained by failure to report negative studies.
- Studies with the most rigorous methodology tended to produce better results.

Here are several other crucial insights that this research revealed:

- “There is no evidence whatsoever in any of the experiments on prayer that anything is ‘sent,’ or that energy of any kind is involved. If prayer were a conventional form of energy, it should weaken as distance is increased, and this does not happen. If it were energy, its effects could be shielded, but this has not proved possible. This strongly suggests that prayer does not involve any conventional form of energy or signal . . . and nothing seemed capable of stopping or blocking it” (pp. xviii, 83).
- One place where Dossey and the faith healers we watched in the film agree has to do with LOVE as the power that brings about healing: “Virtually all psychic healers who use prayer agree. They claim uniformly that distance is not a factor in the healing power of prayer, and most of them state emphatically that **love is the power that makes it possible for them to reach out to heal at a distance**. During attempts at healing, healers generally feel infused by love and transformed by caring. This feeling is so pronounced that they typically describe ‘becoming one’ with the person being prayed for” (p. 111).

Here’s what I regard as one of the most important insights from this research:

- Dossey’s survey of the research revealed that that *non-specific, “thy will be done” prayers tend to be significantly more successful in effecting healing than aggressive, “prayer-warrior” approaches*. While both methods were demonstrably helpful, *the non-directed, accepting approach was often twice as effective* (p. 97).
- “Some studies, in fact, showed that a simple ‘Thy will be done’ approach was quantitatively more powerful than when specific results were held in the mind. In many experiments, a simple attitude of prayerfulness — an all-pervading sense of holiness and a feeling of empathy, caring, and compassion for the [person] in need—seemed to set the stage for healing” (p. xvii).
- “Often a prayerful, prayer-like attitude of devotion and acceptance—*not robust, aggressive prayer for specific outcomes, including eradication of the cancer—precedes the cure*. . . . Prayerfulness—not the world-manipulating, disease-bashing forms of prayer to which most Westerners resort when sick—permeates many cases of profound illness that improve spontaneously.

Prayerfulness allows us to reach a plane of experience where illness can be experienced as a natural part of life, and where its acceptance transcends passivity. If the disease disappears, we are grateful; if it remains, that too is reason for gratitude” (pp. 31-32, 27).



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- The effect size remained constant over the more than fifty years under consideration (p. 246).

To say all this more succinctly, **prayers for “Thy will be done” or for “God’s highest good to be accomplished” are demonstrably more than twice as likely to lead to healing as are “name it and claim it” prayers to “Be Healed!”**

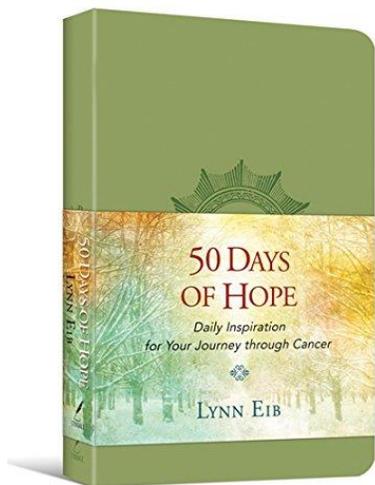
But here’s what I think is Dossey’s MOST IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION:

“By ‘cure’ I do not mean the physical disappearance of cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, or stroke, but *something more marvelous*—the realization that physical illness, no matter how painful or grotesque, is at some level of secondary importance in the total scheme of our existence. *This is the awareness that one’s authentic, higher self is completely impervious to the ravages of any physical ailment whatever*” (pp. 35-36).

This, to me, is the key to one of the most frequently misunderstood and misapplied passages related to healing:

14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:14-16).

The healing James affirms, it seems to me, is not necessarily healing in our normal, everyday sense. The healing James affirms is “*something more marvelous*—the realization that physical illness, no matter how painful or grotesque, is at some level of secondary importance in the total scheme of our existence. ***This is the awareness that one’s authentic, higher self is completely impervious to the ravages of any physical ailment whatever.***”



I’ve been helped in my cancer journey by Lynn Eib’s little book, *50 Days of Hope*.⁴ A long-time cancer survivor and the founder of one of the first cancer support groups in the nation, something Lynn wrote in the passage I read this morning speaks to what I’m trying to convey in this essay:

“My blessing from cancer is certainly *not* the one I sought, but because God knows me and loves me, He knew how to bless me. He knows you. He loves you. **He can bless you through cancer . . . if you let Him decide the blessing.**”

Letting God decide the shape of the blessing is a very different sort of prayer than the “Be Healed!” kind of prayer. Letting God determine the shape of the blessing is a “Thy Will be Done” sort of prayer. Letting God determine the shape of the blessing is consistent with *the awareness that one’s authentic, higher self is completely impervious to the ravages of any physical ailment whatever.*

On that Tuesday afternoon three weeks ago, it was not really up to me whether I was going to live or die. It wasn’t really up to the fine Emergency Department staff, either. I may eventually die from cancer, or I may not. My days are in the hands of One who loves me utterly and who is with me always.

⁴ Lynn Eib, *50 Days of Hope: Daily Inspiration for your Journey through Cancer* (Tyndale, 2012).

Whether I live or die, I am with the Lord. And all is well.

Dave

*Thy will
be
done.*