

WHAT'S THE DELAY?

Let us pray. *Beloved God, who cares for us beyond our imagining and desires that we be made whole, we beseech you in the name of Jesus to send forth the Holy Spirit to enlightens minds, liberate our hearts, and restore our bodies through Jesus Christ our Lord who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.*

Recently, David Virtue, journalist and self-appointed critic of the Church, paid a visit to Indonesia where he met Pastor Choo. She shared with him the following two occurrences, which took place before her very eyes.

On the Island of Tarakan off the coast of Indonesia a woman gave birth and suddenly was crippled, her hands and feet ceased to function, she became mentally disturbed and no longer able to speak. Looking for a cure, over the next two months she sold off all her jewelry to pay doctors, hospitals, numerous witch doctors, and invoked family gods. She was a Buddhist. Nothing helped. She could no longer take care of her baby. She and her family lost hope. Then she heard about some Christian missionaries, Anglicans in fact. Perhaps they could help her. She was brought to the house where members of the church began to pray over her and began to improve. She was taught to call on the name of Jesus. Though not a believer, she did what was suggested. Within hours she was completely healed and subsequently confessed Jesus. Now healthy, she could take care of her baby again. A man in the village could not sleep; the pain in his shoulders would not go away. He went to Singapore to see the best doctors, but the pain continued. He returned to Tarakan and contemplated suicide. Then, he heard about some Anglican missionaries. He invited them into his house and told them about the terrible pains he was having; they laid hands on him and prayed for him. He was suddenly healed and confessed Jesus.

You have just heard two accounts of individuals miraculously healed by prayer in the name of Jesus. Though you may find these accounts interesting and provoking, you may be saying to yourselves, "Well, why is it that these miraculous events, these incredible stories of healing, why is it that they always seem to occur on the other side of the globe. Indonesia is just that— on the other side of the world. You may even have heard of people being raised from the dead in Africa or Korea, but then again those places are far away. Why is it, despite what the televangelists might wish us to believe, why is it that these wonderful healings are available to others, oftentimes in poor countries, and seemingly not to us: not to my child, not to my parent dying from cancer, not to my friend, who suffers from chronic back pain. Why is it? Maybe, these healing are mere myths, spun-out of the imagination of the minds of uneducated foreign lands.

The longtime successful practitioner of Christian healing, the Rev. Dr. Francis MacNutt has spent considerable time addressing the question of why the western church is so anemic when it comes to offering healing. In his book, entitled The Nearly Perfect Crime: How the Church Almost Killed the Ministry of Healing, MacNutt observes that the early church until around the fourth century regularly offered healing through prayer and anointing with oil. This was no special ministry reserved for the clergy leadership. All Christians were considered to be equally viable vessels for offering prayers for

healing. But as Christianity became more socially acceptable, beginning with Emperor Constantine's endorsement, the more miraculous dimensions of the Christian faith began to wane. Christianity saw itself as triumphant, so, the need for proof, provided by healing and other Spirit-manifestations like prophecy, died out or at least was not encouraged. Church leaders no longer felt much need for signs and wonders.

Other influences further diluted the Church's encouragement of healing, ultimately denying it as a present reality all together. For St. Augustine healing could only be accomplished by the pious and holy, a status, which the humble did not presume to achieve. This resulted in healing being sacramentalized, meaning that it became a formal rite of the church, which only the clergy could administer. Finally, the opportunity for healing was reduced to being only available for those near death. Extreme unction is what it was called; which eventually morphed into Last Rites for a dying individual. Added to this notion of the pious only being qualified to heal was the perverse idea that one could become pious through suffering and sickness. Why seek to be healed if you think suffering and sickness will somehow make you more holy? This view turned sickness, not healing, into the blessing. We might ask, "What kind of human father or mother would inflict sickness and pain on his or her child in order to test the child's goodness?" Nowhere in scripture is it recorded that Jesus told sick people that He was not going to heal them because their sickness was a blessing sent by God.

Yet, confidence in healing in the name of Jesus did not stop because of bad theology on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, the Roman Church at least allowed for its possibility. No, it was the Protestant Reformation, though it was supposed to restore faithfulness to Scripture, which came the closest to delivering Last Rites to praying for healing—in effect, pronouncing healing dead. The reformer, who most deeply wounded the healing ministry, was also the most influential. His name — John Calvin. For him, miracles of healing were not just rare; they ended with the death of the last apostle. The name for this view that believed God no longer healed is Cessationism, meaning to cease.

But, the attack on healing and the supernatural did not stop with Calvin. With the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century (questionable concept when you think about it — the enlightenment. It was more like the "endarkment," especially in respect to theology.), anyway, with the Enlightenment and its emphasis on rationalism, the philosopher, David Hume, was able to declare that the miracles in the life of Jesus never even occurred. Hume said that if miracles are not happening in the present, then why should we believe they happened in the past. The effect of this secular, scientific worldview led many to see healing as well as exorcism as the remnants of a primitive understanding of nature. Yet, it got even worse, Rudolf Bultmann, the single most influential NT scholar of the twentieth century, continued the liberal tradition of regarding the healing stories of the Bible as just "myths." For him the healing miracles were impossible and the Resurrection did not happen in any literal sense.

So, given what I have shared with you, is it any wonder that we so seldom hear of God healing in the western Church. The Church, as if by some sadomasochistic design towards itself, seems to have conspired to stomp out the miraculous from the Christian faith. Never mind that Jesus said that the authenticity of his messiahship was clearly evidenced in the fact that He healed the physically sick. Remember His words in respect to Himself in Luke 7:22-23. "*Go and tell John [the Baptist] what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.*" In other words, the kingdom of God was at hand. Isn't it interesting that in these

very words Jesus recognizes that some will find the miraculous offensive.

Regardless, I hope in my round about way that I have not only offered you some credible reasons why healing is scarce, since, we, the Church, have done all in our power if not to eliminate it, then surely make it inaccessible, but that I have also made it clear that healing in the name of Jesus is still a reality available to us today. If healing in the name of Jesus occurs on the other side of the globe, then there is no reason why it should not happen right here in our own backyards. Therefore, if the question is not whether healing is still a reality today, then what is the question? Why, if when we pray for an individual to be healed of whatever the problem, why is it that his or her healing, for lack of better of word, is delayed? We may say to ourselves, “Well, gee, in the Bible Jesus instantaneously healed people.” But, I ask you, “Did He really. Did Jesus heal people instantly?” Let’s take a look.

The four Gospels record at least 25 healings of individuals. Add to that any number of mass healings. Recall just a few of those individual healings: the healing of a leper, a paralytic, the man born blind, and the woman with an issue of blood. Do you notice what all these individuals have in common aside from suffering from some illness? Though healed by Jesus, none of them were healed instantaneously?

What, you say? When Jesus touched them they were healed. That’s correct. But, how long had they been sick before they were healed — a long time. Everyone one of those illnesses was chronic. Being born blind, that’s a long time. John’s gospel (5:2-5) records that in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate at a pool “*One man [healed by Jesus] had been ill for thirty-eight years.*” Thirty-eight years is a long time to be sick. That is not being healed instantly. Certainly, these individuals were immediately healed when Jesus touched them, but they were sick for a long time prior to that. And, what of those people Jesus raised from the dead? If memory serves me right, there are at least three recorded instances of Jesus raising people from the dead— Lazarus being the most notable. Not to be funny, but one would surely have to say that there had definitely been a delay in healing if a person has already died. In fact, in most minds healing is a lost opportunity if someone has already expired.

So, why the obvious delay in healing? Even in our gospel reading today, Jesus seems to contrive to delay healing the woman’s daughter of a demon. At first when she asked for Jesus’ help He ignored her. Then He said He wasn’t sent to help her. Three times she had to ask for Jesus’ help before He would heal her daughter. What must God, what must Jesus be waiting on before we are to be healed by them?

I am reminded of the story of a mechanic, who was removing a cylinder head from the motor of a Harley motorcycle when he spotted a well-known heart surgeon in his shop. The mechanic shouted across the garage, “Hey Doc, can I ask you a question?” The surgeon, a bit surprised, walked over to the mechanic, who asked, “So Doc, look at this engine. I open its heart, take valves out, repair any damage, and then put them back in, and when I finish, it works just like new. So how come I get such a small salary and you get the really big bucks, when you and I are doing basically the same work?” The surgeon paused, smiled and leaned over, and whispered to the mechanic, “Try doing it with the engine running.”

Not to be overly simplistic, but when God heals us there is more to be considered because our engines are running. Furthermore, our engines are made up of more than just our bodies. We have feelings, thoughts, and a spirit. We have others with whom our lives are intimately and intricately interwoven. All this God takes into account within the context of eternity. He is interested in more than just our health and our life here on earth. He is interested in our health and life for an eternity.

Some of you may recall the time I shared when I was asking God to heal me from tachycardia,

which is when one's heart beats very, very fast — like at a 160 beats per minute. This is not a plumbing problem as with heart by-pass surgery. Rather, it is an electrical problem. When my heart would beat at that incredible rate, it was terrifying. I literally did not know whether I was going to die in the next minute. You can imagine the anxiety this caused me. I prayed and prayed that God would heal me of these episodes of rapid heart beat. Nothing happened. I went to a cardiologist. He gave me a medication that was suppose to keep my heart from racing. He tried one dosage. Nothing happened. He tried another. Nothing happened. This must have gone on for some six months before I was sent to another specialist, who was to catheterize my heart in hopes of identifying and correcting the nerves that were causing the electrical problem. You know, they were going to thread these wires and tubes through my veins and arteries and into my heart.

Well, if I was afraid when my heart beat like crazy, I can tell you that I experienced absolute terror on the morning Emily and I went to the hospital to have my heart catheterized. In fact, I told Emily that I couldn't stand it and was leaving the hospital, walking out. Then she suggested I read Psalm 91: *"For [God] will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence . . . I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him my salvation."* Suddenly, in the reading of these words, it hit me in a way I never understood before. Suddenly, here in the direst of circumstances I experienced how much God loved me. With that all my fear disappeared. I could even look at the possibility of my death and not be afraid.

I had thought I was calling upon God to heal my heart from beating so fast, and if He would not do that, then surely He would give me that peace that passes all understanding. Yet He delayed; neither of these did He give me immediately. But more importantly, Jesus gave me something even larger and more enduring than a healed heart and less anxiety. Instead, He revealed to me in the words of 1 John 4:18, *"perfect love casts out fear,"* even the fear of death. And, that my friends was and is by far the more enduring gift.

In a few moments you will be given the opportunity after the Eucharist to come forward for healing. I don't know what your needs for healing are. They may be physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, financial, or whatever. Some of you may need to repent and ask Jesus to be your Lord and Saviour. Regardless, this much I can assure you. God in Jesus does hear your cry to Him. He will heal you. And, if there is a delay in your healing, remember Jesus wants to restore more than your body, your mind or your spirit. He wants to restore all of you. Therefore, come forward in faith, for as little or as much as you have, and throw yourselves upon Jesus' mercy and compassion. He loves you and He will bless you.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.