

"From Pills to Prayers"

Psalm 145:14-19; Acts 9:36-42

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 10, 2016 – 8th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

I was drawn to an old bottle at an antique show. It said "Dr. Hewlett's Elixir and Restorative." Underneath the name of the product it promised "Guaranteed to cure ..." but then the rest of the label was missing.

Patent medicines were a staple in this country before the advent of modern drugs. When a person ailed, he would likely try anything that held out a promise of relief. Some entrepreneurs like Dr. Samuel Hartman here in Columbus, with his potion called Peruna, became wealthy from their self-styled remedies.

This advertisement for Beecham's Pills is typical. It appeared in an 1889 magazine.

Painless. Effectual. For bilious and nervous disorders, such as gas and pain in the stomach, sick headache, giddiness, swelling after meals, dizziness, cold chills, flushings of heat, loss of appetite, shortness of breath, scurvy, blotches on the skin, disturbed sleep, frightful dreams, and all nervous and trembling sensations. The first dose will give relief in twenty minutes. Beecham's Pills, taken as directed, will quickly restore a person to complete health.

Well, at only .25 a box for this miracle drug, I'm sure they had plenty of takers. Besides, in this ad, they were including a free photo of President Benjamin Harrison. What could you lose?

Now if that didn't appeal to you, you could always drink Hungarian Blackberry Juice. It declared that it would prevent stomach troubles of all kinds. It also instructed you to take it with liberal amounts of whiskey, brandy, or gin. I guess if it didn't work, you got to the point where you wouldn't care anymore.

Sickness has always been a bane of humanity. When we don't feel good it both debilitates and worries us. If you got up today without aches or pain, you'll have some before the day is over. Others of us live with chronic disease or fatigue. No, we're no strangers to health problems, nor were the ancient Hebrews.

Think how often people came to Jesus asking to be healed. It far outnumbered those who came to him asking to be enlightened. Maybe that's not surprising. Pain is a kind of prison, a restraint that keeps us from living life fully. When it becomes intense enough, it overrides almost everything else. Such suffering can't be ignored; it seeks relief wherever it can be found.

In scripture this morning we have the story of a healing. It tells of Tabitha or, as she is known in the Greek, Dorcas. This is the only mention we have of her. She falls ill and dies, leaving behind a group of widows to whom she has ministered and provided clothing and other support.

Widows in Israel, we know, were among the poorest people. There are repeated admonitions in the Bible to show mercy toward them, and apparently Tabitha has taken this to heart. She is a good example of kindness and concern. Now she is dead, and the poor widows weep in grief, not knowing what will become of them or to whom they can now turn. They begin the burial preparations and place her body in an upstairs room.

Some of the believers in that town hear that Peter is nearby, so they go to Joppa and ask him to come back with them. Perhaps they summon him so that he can conduct a funeral or console those who mourn. We're not told. When he arrives he's taken to the room where Tabitha has been laid. He clears everyone out and prays over the body.

In the verses just immediate to our lesson for today it relates how Peter had brought about the healing of a paralytic, but this is different. The woman before him is dead or appears to be. Certainly the widows have conceded her death. Still, this doesn't deter Peter. He prays over her all the same.

A miracle is when the seemingly impossible happens. Miracles are hard to explain, simply because they are contrary to expectations. So I have no explanation for what occurs next in our lesson other than to note along with you what is reported. "Then," it says, "she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and he helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa and many believed in the Lord."

One physician writing today affirms other forms of healing and says that he believes in them even though he can't explain them. He reminds us that medicine is full of examples where healing is unexplained and, yet, the evidence of recovery is right there before us. The person was critically ill one day and well the next. Who can deny the obvious?

While this healing story is interesting on its own, it is probably included in Acts because it illustrates a power of the Spirit given to Peter and other early disciples. This is the very power that Jesus had, and by his will and intention, it has now been extended to them as well.

Miracles do happen. They happened then and they happen now. They're not limited to just things of the body, either, any more than suffering is limited to just the physical part of us. Often the greatest pain that we know is a pain of the soul. And that pain longs for healing, too.

Joyce McCullough, a hospital chaplain, relates this from personal experience: "Somehow, in my being with patients, I hope that they would get a sense of God's love and compassion. I pray for healing in whatever way they might need, in body, mind, and spirit.

She continues, "Prayer is always answered. Maybe not in a way that can be seen as a physical cure, but effects of prayer come through a sense of peace, comfort, insight ... even crying. Physicians might look for a cure, but chaplains hope for the healing of body, mind, or spirit. We want patients to have an understanding of themselves, God, and others."

Let's consider for the moment that healing is possible even when a cure is not. Some of us have been wounded deeply in the past. Depending on our situation, those wounds might still be open and painful though they were incurred long ago. Nothing will remove them from us.

Denial only works for so long. Still, even these extreme wounds can heal, though they may never disappear, and the damage caused cannot be forgotten.

The emphasis in this morning's text isn't on us and our actions; rather, it's on God and God's actions. It isn't on self-reliance, but spiritual-reliance. This is an important difference.

We live in a time when the stress is on doing for yourself. There are plenty of books written about taking charge of your life. I'm certainly not against that, just so that this isn't seen as the answer to all life's questions. There are some things we must do to move ahead in life, but there are also many things we can't do on our own.

Today's lesson reminds us that miracles are not limited to Jesus alone. That in no way diminishes who he is and what he did, but reflects the extension of power he provides to Peter. Nor does it even stop there. Divine energy is so great and so abundant that it overflows from Jesus into the life of everyone who is a committed disciple.

Those who are strong in faith really do have a power for healing within them. You may have it, and yet be unaware of it. Many of you have experienced this gift and know what I mean. Others hopefully, in time, will realize it first-hand.

How does one go about healing? No different from Peter. It begins by being aware of need and responding, and then praying directly and sincerely from the heart. You can't step into this tentatively, but you have to enter in fully. And you have to believe that what you are asking for is possible, though the form of that healing will be as it is given. And it may not be instantaneous, but may require continual prayer—yours and others—over a period of time.

I remember one family where the father had a quickly spreading form of cancer. A great many people prayed for that man, but seemingly to no avail. The disease wasn't arrested and he died, but not before a father and son were reconciled after years of painful estrangement. Death may not have been avoided, but at the time it came the man's hand was being held strongly by the son he thought he had lost for good. A relationship had been healed, if not a body that was ravaged by time.

Even today someone may desperately need the healing of which you can be an instrument. You cannot determine the course of that healing, but you can be among those who remember and actively care and lift up your daily concern. You can also offer simple things that might bring direct comfort in a time of hurting. And it all starts by allowing God to work in and through you. That's the power given us through Christ.