

## A Brief Reflection on Healing Sunday

October 20, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Revelation 22: 1-5*

And [the messenger of God] showed me a river with the water of life, clear and bright as crystal, coming forth from the throne of God and the lamb, flowing right through the city's street. And on either side of the river were trees, producing a full harvest of fruit each month, and the leaves of those trees are for a healing of the nations. And no longer will there be anything accursed; and the throne of God and the lamb will be in the city, and God's servants will worship God, and they will see the face of God, who will claim them as God's very own. And there will be no more night, and the blessed will have no need of lantern or sun, because the Almighty God will shine upon them, and they will reign, ages upon ages, without end.

Let us pray: Blessed God, thank you for these words of life. May my words now reflect your Word for us here in this place and time, with all we bring this gathering today, our hopes and fears, gratitude and anxieties, our vitality and our need for healing. May your Spirit dwell in us richly through your Word. Amen.

Perhaps you've heard this story before, but even if so, it's worth hearing again. It comes from Tony Campolo, a Baptist pastor who is evangelical enough to believe in the healing power of prayer, and progressive enough to hold that it's a grave mistake for evangelicals to support Donald Trump. Campolo tells a story about leading a revival at a church in Oregon, where he was asked to pray for a man who had cancer. Campolo prayed boldly for the man's healing, and anointed him with oil. The next week he got a telephone call from the man's wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." Campolo thought when he heard her use the past tense verb that the Spirit had used his prayer to work a miracle and his cancer had been eradicated. But before he could think much about it she said, "He died."

Campolo felt terrible. But she continued, "Don't feel bad. When he came into that church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence," the woman said.

But she continued, "After you prayed for him, a peace had come over him and a joy had come into him. Tony, his last three days were among the best days of our lives. We sang. We laughed. We read Scripture. We prayed. They were wonderful days. And I called to thank you for anointing him and praying for healing."

And then she said something incredibly profound. She said, "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."

That's what we hope for at this service of healing. We pray and we anoint, not to cure so much, as to heal. Not to fix, but to make whole. And isn't wholeness what we all need most? I've had all too many

conversations through the years with people recently diagnosed with cancer, and I don't think I've ever heard someone say, "I fear most the physical suffering I might go through." What they say is rather, "I'm so sad that I might miss out on more days with my loved ones, my family, my dear friends." Sometimes they say there is so much more I want to do and experience. It's all about missing out. The implication is that their life won't be whole. They long for wholeness.

Of course, every illness doesn't carry a reasonable risk of death, but it's amazing how fast our minds go there, right? A couple years ago I had a test result that, worst case scenario, could be a sign of bladder cancer. Two days later I learned it was nothing, but whoa, those two days were filled with worry. Worry about not having a full life. Worry about my life not being whole.

Maybe you'll come forward in a bit for prayer and anointing, maybe you'll remain in the pews, but we have this service because we all need healing. We all need wholeness. Illness might make that clearer. It might make us think more about our need for healing, but need it, we all do. Whether the wholeness you seek is in the bodily realm, the relational realm, the social realm, the spiritual realm, it's all about healing of your soul, your self.

In our ritual, we use anointing oil. And that oil is a visible sign of the wholeness that comes from God. In the Christian tradition anointing oil carries many meanings and nuances. But the one that strikes me as most resonant today is the sheer extravagance of it. In scripture, the oil represents abundance, superfluity, nimety, wholeness. Think of Psalm 23. "You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows." The oil and the abundance are parallel. There is so much. There is completeness. There is wholeness. The oil we use shows us that no matter what is going on in our bodies or our lives, we can be whole, because of the extravagant wholeness that comes from being a precious child of God.

This is not to deny hardship or suffering or grief, of course. When someone is going through a difficult time, for whatever reason, involving body, or relationship, or mind, or soul, my first response is, well, I often try to say it more delicately, but my first response is Oh, that sucks.... More Biblically, that would be the words we read together earlier from Psalm 13, Oh God, how long. How long will you forget me? Acknowledging that pain is important.

But tenderly, hopefully, I also say today that that cry is not the last word. In John's vision of the restored creation in the 22nd chapter of Revelation, there is a grove of trees standing alongside the river, which flows with the water of life. And those trees, whose roots are fed by that water, they bring healing to the nations. Healing. Wholeness. For everyone. Perhaps not a cure, as Tony Campolo names it, but healing.

As the church, we work to embody now, in this moment and throughout our life, what God has in store for all creation. And what God has in store is wholeness for all.

In the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.