

Outfitted for Healing

by Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins

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Ephesians 4.12

Have you ever needed a healing? Maybe a relationship really went wrong, and left you in pain. You needed some healing. Maybe a dream seemed destroyed, and you needed a healing. Maybe the world around you seemed to be falling apart, and it left you terrified, even immobilized, and you needed a healing. Maybe the doctor gave you discouraging news that left you so afraid or so depressed that before you could even consider treatment options, you needed a deep healing of mind and spirit. Have you ever needed a healing?

Our conference theme tonight comes from Ephesians, where we read that the church has been given people with different gifts “to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ.”

Ephesians is a good book to address this topic. It’s attributed to the Apostle Paul, but scholars think it was actually written about 35 years after Paul’s death. That means it was written some 71 years after Jesus’ crucifixion, and about 30 years after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple . The people in the community that the book of Ephesians is addressing have experienced decades of loss and grief and pain and fear. They need some healing.

And so the writer of Ephesians says, “grace was given to each of us...And some were called to be apostles, others prophets, others evangelists, others pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ” (4.7, 11-12).

Each of us has something to share, and we are called to share our gifts. As we share, we find the principle of sowing and reaping remains true. We are giving to others, we are giving to the community, the movement, the church, to the work of God, and as we are giving, we are also receiving something. As we share hope, love, encouragement, resources, time...we find we are connected more deeply to that with which we are sharing. We find we have more to offer than we realized. We are lifted up. By sharing our gifts, we are participating in the on-going miracle of healing.

Build up your people and your people will build up your church. Build up your consciousness and your consciousness will build up your body. Build up the body, and it is then able to be a source of joy in your life...whether the body of cells, tissues, organs, and atoms, or the body of believers and seekers we call the Church.

Sharing our gifts, our selves, builds up others and it builds us up, too. Healing is about building us up and lifting us up.

Now the writer of Ephesians will go on to try to enforce the Roman Household codes by insisting wives submit to husbands, children to parents, slaves to masters. That was the Roman culture and it reinforced imperial privilege and power. If the household looked like a mini-model of the empire, then the empire would seem acceptable and people wouldn’t think to rebel against it.

But this writer claiming to be Paul has forgotten or overlooked that the real Paul was friends with the leader Lydia, who knew women prophets and praised women deacons, who told women that when they speak from the pulpit they should have long hair or head coverings...which means he expected that women would speak from the pulpit!

The long hair and head coverings were about cultural norms of his day, but regardless of the fashion he encouraged them to observe, he clearly thought there would be women preachers.

Why mention Paul’s errors? Why compare what Paul did say with what others used his name to say? Because we need prophets and teachers and shepherds who will help heal the damage

done by scripture misused, so that that people can trust the church to stand with them for other healing needs. In the power of healed community, the mighty currents of divine love can flow through us to strengthen and renew us.

Jesus reinterpreted traditions and scriptures...The tradition says Jesus took Elijah's cup at the last supper and instead of reserving it for the possible return of Elijah, he offered it to everyone at table, leaving no one out...as if to say "let's not wait for the prophet's return any longer; let us be the prophetic voice that calls for justice, inclusion, and healing...right here and right now."

Jesus healed on the Sabbath...Gathered food on the Sabbath. He stunned his critics by saying, "We are not made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath is made for us." We aren't religion's slaves; religion is OUR tool.

Paul, too, challenged tradition...not insisting that Gentiles convert to Judaism to become Christ followers, not insisting new-comers to the movement keep kosher or that Gentile men undergo circumcision...for Paul, baptism was a good enough symbol of God's covenant with us.

Jesus was tempted by the misuse of scripture. In the desert before Jesus began his ministry, Evil itself had the temerity to say, "It is written..." Evil knew the scriptures, quoted them accurately and legalistically to limit, control, and manipulate Jesus...but Jesus didn't fall for it. Not everyone who quotes bible verses at you has your best interest at heart! Yes, there are hateful sayings in the bible...Jesus showed us how to deal with that...he said, "Treat others the way you want to be treated...THIS is the law and the prophets." He said the greatest commandments are to love god and neighbor. He said, "I give you a new commandment – love one another."

Paul said, "the letter kills but the spirit gives life." Paul also said, "whoever loves has fulfilled the law."

They are telling us that the spirit of scripture is love, hope, empowerment, and inclusion. The holy spirit is the spirit of wholeness, the life-giving power and presence of God. When religion is used to spread hope, healing, happiness, harmony, and wholeness it is being used properly. When it is used to divide, terrify, manipulate, exclude, or wound, we can be sure that it is being misused. And when it has been misused, we are here to offer healing from that religious abuse.

We can take any sentence in the bible and make a hateful case with it, but that is not the spirit of the scriptures...that is not the overarching message, that is not the liberating word of God that is to found in but in no way limited by the bible. If a scripture verse makes you feel worse, reinterpret it or find a new one. Isn't that picking/choosing? Of course it is...everyone does it. Evil chose the verse that it hoped would dis-empower Jesus; and Jesus chose to see past that manipulative technique and he chose to affirm a more positive message. As Christ followers, we can do the same!

We will choose what we believe anyway, so why would we ever choose the negative, the nasty, or the nefarious understandings. We are going to choose; let's choose the good, the empowering, the hopeful, the life-giving...the healing. We certainly don't need to agree with those who are choosing the passages that justify their prejudices or their privilege while ignoring the passages that offer hope, equality, and liberation!

Let's choose the life-giving spirit over the life-destroying legalism which has wounded so many and from which so many still need to be healed.

It's time to heal religious oppression by abandoning the legalism and prejudices and fears that choke the life out of us and by embracing the more uplifting view that love is the commandment that heals and redeems.

Jesus touched the untouchable...to be lovingly touched helped people feel better about themselves. They rediscovered the spiritual pattern of their divine wholeness and felt

miraculously enlivened. He used the power of hope and love, and that power is in the room tonight!

A woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years reached out and touched Jesus' clothes...She reached out...she participated in her own miracle.

A man at the pool of Bethesda had waited for decades for healing to overtake him. Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be well?" The man had to decide that he was willing to do something. Jesus challenged him to take up his mat and walk.

Even Lazarus had to do something. In his tomb, bound in his grave clothes, he was encouraged by Jesus to do something. "Lazarus, come out!"

A Canaanite woman came to Jesus seeking healing for her daughter. He was tempted to brush her aside...after all, a verse in Deuteronomy says that Canaanites should be killed! But the woman did something...she challenged Jesus' religious and ethnic prejudice. He called her a dog, an ethnic slur, and she responded by saying, "If I were a dog you'd give me scraps. How about treating me with at least as much compassion as you would a dog." And Jesus' mind was opened, and rather than affirming the legalistic prejudice of scripture and tradition, he affirmed the woman's faith and her daughter was healed.

Naaman had to wash in the river.

Jacob had to wrestle with an angel and refuse to let go to get his blessing.

Paul prayed, and prayed, and prayed again before he learned, "grace is sufficient."

And when he was bitten by a poisonous snake on Malta, he had to shake the serpent off. He was left unharmed.

All of these healings share something in common...the miracle was never forced on anyone.

Each time, the person had to participate in their own miracle, often even initiating it. Healing is not passive. Waiting for it to sneak up on you will probably not lead to a satisfactory result. We may have step up, speak out, confront fears, shake off the toxicity, wrestle with a new idea until it leads to a breakthrough.

Tonight we are doing something. We are building up the body with prayer.

There is the prayer of supplication – God help.

There is the prayer of affirmation – God you are helping me {The Lord is my shepherd, I want for nothing; God I thank you for hearing me and I know that you always hear me; Christ in you the hope of glory; In God we live and move and have our being; I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me}.

And there is the prayer of demonstration – as I help myself, I experience god's power manifesting in, through, and as me. Your talk talks, and your walk talks, but your walk talks louder than your talk talks.

Whichever develops the consciousness of empowerment, wholeness, and renewal is the prayer we need. Supplication may be OK, affirmation may be better, but for healing, demonstration is essential. In fact, one form of prayer can lead to the next. We might begin with "God heal me," and move on to "God is my health," and then finally we are acting as if our hope has been renewed, as if we have indefatigable joy, as if the present moment is a perfect moment filled with life-giving, divine love. We are praying with our lives, and that is the prayer that is without ceasing.

Take up your mat and walk. Lazarus come out! Shake off that poisonous attitude. Wrestle with the new idea until you discover who you really are – a child of God, made in the image of God, filled with the spirit of God...entitled right now to God's highest and best!

And being healed...you then have healing to offer.

You can't teach what you don't know and you can't lead where you won't go and you certainly can't give what you don't have.

In the Sursum Corda of the communion liturgy, we say, "God is with you/and also with you. Lift up your hearts/we lift them to God." Sursum Corda...lift up your heart. The Psalmist says, "Lift up your heads, Oh gates!" and "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help."

Hagar in the desert lifts up her head, broadens her perspective, and sees what in her despair she had almost overlooked. The refreshing, life-saving well was there the whole time, but she couldn't see it until she lifted up her head and broadened her view. The miracle was that she could allow herself to see the opportunity present to her even in the midst of her difficulty. Lift up your heart, and you will be lifted up. And isn't that healing?

With healed attitudes, healed self-images, a healed relationship with God, and even healed bodies...we will find we are blessed to be a blessing, and we have been equipped and called to build up the communal body.

We are children of God, and we are entitled to live God filled lives of hope and joy. We are entitled to be lifted up tonight. And as we are lifted up, we are then called to lift up others. This much, the writer of Ephesians got right. And this is the good news.