

The Shawl, the Bowl, and the Prayer  
St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC  
The Very Rev. Ken Gray  
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So what do the shawl, the bowl and the prayer have in common? They are each outward and visible signs of a special ministry here at St. Paul's, a ministry sometimes called "healing ministry" or in other words such as "special prayer" or a "ministry of encouragement."

For some the phrase "healing ministry" is problematic conjuring up stories like the flawed faith healer Elmer Gantry, and for others the Steve Martin movie "Leap of Faith." In Leap of Faith, Martin is a deceitful faith healer ministering the US south. With his devious conspirators he enacts fraudulent healing services which use human and electronic trickery to dupe people into financially supporting their ministry. Their antics are thwarted however when a young boy shows up seeking healing, and is actually healed. The movie ends with a touching scene where Martin and his accomplice try to discern if indeed a real miracle had taken place.

The caricatures of Hollywood put aside, there is much justifiable scepticism around healing ministries though such ministry has been a significant part of traditional Christianity for centuries. I few days ago I visited Christ Church Cathedral in Vancouver to see a fibre-art installation in a side chapel where years ago I went in a time of acute need for anointing and special prayer during a Sunday morning service. I can't say anything in particular "happened" at that time; I was simply glad there was a place for my needs and care.

From within our own tradition and practice, and in the voice of scripture we hear of God's healing, restorative, supportive presence. From today's Hebrew Bible passage we hear these words:

I am about to create new heavens  
and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered  
or come to mind.  
But be glad and rejoice for ever  
in what I am creating;

God's real abiding presence can and is understood as creative and restorative, not only of and for individuals but of cultures and history itself.

No more shall there be in (Jerusalem)  
an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

God's healing presence extends our vision and increases hope, promotes resilience and celebrates life even amidst death.

Before they call I will answer,  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain, says the Lord. (Isaiah 65:17-25)

Restorative love breaks down barriers and creates community at every opportunity, including reconciling opposite attitudes, ambitions, understandings.

Here at St. Paul's, in various ways at public liturgies we embody these truths. We make **space for special prayer** at the 10 a.m. service and are considering options at other times. People come for a wide variety of reasons—for encouragement when faced with difficult life and health circumstances, or for strength through adversity. People come with concerns for self or others. People express grief or thanksgiving or appreciation or confusion. People come when there is a need to say something in an intimate, supportive and spiritual setting. People receive prayer and if they wish the laying on of hands and anointing with Holy Oil specially blessed by the bishop for this purpose.

Prayer ministry is not a time for counselling and is not lengthy. Such long-term conversation is best pursued with the clergy or with a trusted friend. As with other Anglican traditions, none *must* partake, some *should*, but *none must* engage in such acts. But it's there. There are currently seven people, clergy and laity preparing to offer and support this ministry. Prayer ministers receive a special blessing prior to communion as a reminder that they are conduits of Grace and in no way its source.

**Another tradition is the prayer bowl**, in which special prayer requests are placed on slips of paper which are brought forward as the prayers of the people commence. These requests are not detailed descriptions of life situations but often simply a name like "Jane" or "Bruce." The bowl is named and included as part of the prayers of the people. The bowl symbolizes God's desire and delight to cherish our concerns. No promises on results; simply care, love and concern.

One additional feature of the ministry is that after the later service the requests are distributed to cathedral parishioners who continue the prayer into the following week.

Finally, now, to the shawl ministry. The PSM is a small group of people who knit and/or crochet prayer shawls for people who need them. The Prayer Shawl is a tangible example of God's love and care for us. For those in need of strength, while undergoing an illness, as well as for joy and celebration the prayer shawl provides and embodies comfort and community. They are given to anyone who needs or wants to be reminded of God's presence and blessings. Shawls are blessed at the Eucharist and distributed to whomever needs one. As the shawl is made, knitters pray for whoever the recipient may be.

As the knitter holds future recipients up, their own compassion for others, helps us to grow in the fruit of the spirit, and we find ourselves blessed with more joy, faithfulness, kindness, grace, and peace as we reach out to others.

(I take a moment now to bless shawls currently in hand . . . )

Each of these three ministries is a response to the truth proclaimed in Gospel and prophetic story. God desires salvation for all. God desires that all obstacles to our receiving this gift are minimized or eliminated. The road to discovering and receiving God's gracious gifts differs greatly from one person to another. God's commitment to all however is universal and specific. In today's canticle from Isaiah 12.2–6 we hear these words:

Surely, it is God who saves me;  
I will trust in him and not be afraid.  
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defence,  
and he will be my Saviour.  
Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing  
from the springs of salvation.

In 2001 I attended my first General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada. We spent an entire day focusing on the church's legacy in the Residential Schools. I was unaware of our history at that time. The truth I learned that day shocked me to the core. After a long day of story telling and historical reflection we gathered for a long service of healing and reconciliation. During the sharing of communion, I and literally hundreds of others made our way to the healing ministry stations. During that time the large congregation of several hundred sang the hymn *Healer of our Every Ill*. To say I emotionally froze understates the case. The refrain cries, hopefully:

Healer of our every ill,  
Light of each tomorrow,  
give us peace beyond our fear,  
and hope beyond our sorrow.

Not all special prayer is this emotional, or public, or significant. Much of this sharing is small, intimate, informal, loving, relevant, immediate. I think we Anglicans have a way of managing this ministry in a disciplined, effective and respectful manner. Through the ministry of the shawl, the bowl and the prayer this ministry continues in our midst for which I say Thanks be to God.