

To expand our understandings of the meaning of anointing, our first scripture reading today will be from Exodus 40:9-15 [read].

And you thought anointing was for the sick! Well, it is for the sick as well as for buildings and for setting people aside to serve in leadership. Hear now the traditional passage read at Brethren anointings – from James 5:13-18 [read].

The traditional understanding of anointing is that the placement of oil on the forehead represents the prayers of the church that this individual who is receiving the anointing might be forgiven of all sin, strengthened in faith, and healed in body, mind, or spirit in accordance with God's Will for that person's life.

That's what we say when we anoint: *"This day I anoint you, my brother (or my sister), in the name of the Lord ... for the forgiveness of your sins, for the strengthening of your faith, and for the healing of your body, mind, or spirit in accordance with God's Will for your life."*

And surely that is the right order in which to anoint. First, for the forgiveness of our sins – so that if there be anything between us and the Lord, it can be forgiven and removed from us (as Psalm 103:12 has declared, *"as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us"*). When the slate is wiped clean, then the Spirit of the Lord can write good things upon our hearts and fill our spirits with blessings.

Then we are ready for the second part of the anointing – for the strengthening of our faith – that we may trust more and more fully in the Lord and be made able to follow wherever he leads. God freely offers his saving grace; but we must open our hearts and minds in faith to receive and embody the new way of living he offers to us through Jesus ... we must be strengthened in faith in order to be healed. So we are anointed for forgiveness, and we are anointed for the strengthening of faith and ...

Then we are ready to be anointed for the healing of our body, mind, or spirit, in accordance with God's Will for our life. The biblical pattern for healing is a far cry from the demands of some faith healers who seem to want to tell God what to do. Biblical anointing is done with humility, admitting our need to be healed from sin, humbly desiring to be made strong enough to receive fully the blessings of life that will come through the strengthening of our faith, and finally asking God to do what God knows is best for us – to heal our bodies, our minds, our spirits, in accordance with God's Will for our lives. We are not telling God what to do. We are asking God to do what God knows we need done.

So I pray with an openness to all possibilities, especially when the medical situation is very serious: “Lord, please touch our brother (or our sister) with healing in the way that you know will be best. If you want to work through the doctors and nurses who are caring for him, please allow his body to be relaxed, at peace with you, with others, and with himself, so that the medical procedures can be done as easily as possible.” [And I have heard from surgeons that they know when someone is at peace like that – the surgery is much easier for them to perform because the body is restful and open to receive the procedure.] “But Lord, if it will not be possible for our brother (or our sister) to recover in body, please grant healing of mind and spirit to make it possible to cope with any times of pain or weakness, so that we may honor you with how we live even in the midst of frailty. And if, Lord, you want to work a miracle and bring healing by your power, separate from the work of the doctors and nurses, then we will honor and praise you indeed, just as we pray that we may honor and praise you for whatever healing you will know is best for our brother (or our sister) at this time in his (or her) life.”

Some of you have heard me tell about the deacon in my first congregation who had gone to the hospital to have a blockage in her carotid artery removed. She was extremely anxious. Mim was a self-described worrier anyway, and this health crisis made her worry intensely. But she believed fervently in the power of anointing to heal, and so on the evening before the surgery, we anointed her in her hospital room, praying that the Lord would send his Holy Spirit upon her in new and fresh ways – to heal her in whichever way God would choose. The anointing brought a calmness of spirit to Mim, and we left her to rest for the night. The next day when I arrived to be with her family during her surgery, I was surprised to find that she was dressed and ready to go home. When the surgeons had taken one last test to see whether the blockage might have moved during the night, so that they would know how to proceed with the surgery, they had been unable to find any blockage whatsoever, and were therefore sending her home. As you may well imagine, we gave thanks to God and Mim *“pondered these things in her heart.”* So did I! It is an astounding thing to experience the healing, Life-giving power of the Lord.

Another story that you may also have heard me tell already – is about a man who grew up in this Annville congregation, became a beloved teacher at Elizabethtown College, and long after his retirement came to stay in the parsonage with us at our first pastorate down near Valley Forge, where he taught in the School of Brethren Life and Thought which we hosted for the Philadelphia area Brethren congregations. Have you figured out who I’m talking about? It was Carl Ziegler.

Carl enjoyed our little daughter so very much – she was just a year or two old, and Carl was so pleased that she was named Naomi. His wife Naomi had died just the year or two before. In his lectures at our meetings, Carl talked about the anointing service that had been held for his wife Naomi shortly before she died. Several days afterward, someone had come up to him and said, “I’m sorry that it didn’t work.” “What do you mean, it didn’t work?” Carl asked. “Well, I mean, we were all praying for her to be healed, but she died.” And Carl replied, “But she was

healed! After Naomi was anointed, her pain left, and she was at peace. And now she is healed in ways she could never have been healed in this world!”

Anointing is such a powerfully meaningful symbolic action. I am glad that we have begun in my lifetime to reclaim it from being used only at deathbeds, important as it still is at such a time.

It has been used at Annual Conferences to install people into leadership. That is like Moses anointing Aaron to serve as priest or the prophet Samuel anointing first Saul and then little David to become kings. It represents our deep, abiding need to have the power of the Lord poured out upon us so that we might have strength and courage and wisdom to lead as God wants us to lead.

That’s why I initially wanted to have an anointing service today. Just last week we worked on short-term and long-term goals for our congregation – and it seems appropriate to receive anointing to be made strong in the power and wisdom of the Lord to carry out the tasks we believe God is calling us to take on. [By the way, for those who were not able to take part in last Sunday’s planning event, the goals that we discerned involve making use of the land behind the church, developing study groups and fellowship activities, and a number of other goals that are being collated for the Ministries Coordinating Team to prioritize and present to Church Council Meetings over the coming year or so.]

Anointing is a special prayer that the power of the Spirit of God will come upon you and make you able for the tasks that God calls you to do – in the church, in your neighborhood, in your studies or in your workplace, in healing the relationships of your family, in healing the world around you. It is not magic; is opening ourselves for the Lord to work as God knows is best.

You are invited to be anointed today – to be set apart, just as the Temple was set apart through anointing with oil in days of old, to become a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit of the Living God. That’s what you are called to be – as the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:19, *“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”* Come and be anointed – give yourself over to the One who created you, who redeems you through Christ’s death upon the cross, and who desires to dwell in you to make you able for all things.

In whatever ways you have sinned, come and be anointed for forgiveness.

In whatever ways doubt or fear assail you, come and be anointed for the strengthening of your faith.

In whatever ways you are sick or weak or weary, come and be anointed for the healing of your body, your mind, or your spirit, in accordance with God’s Will for your life, so that God’s purposes for you and for the world around you may be fulfilled.

And if there are people who are not here who need God's healing touch and you will go to be with them, come and be anointed that the Lord may be at work through you to be an agent of healing to touch their lives this week.

There will not be time during this service of anointing for us to talk at length, as we would be able to do in an anointing service under other circumstances. But please let me or one of the deacons know if it would be helpful to you to have opportunity to talk and pray together further. We would be glad to be helpful as best we can.

We will sing as the anointing takes place this morning – as many verses as are needed. You are each welcome to come to be anointed. Two of our deacons will come to stand on either side of me, so we can anoint three persons at a time. As you are anointed, you will be touched with the sign of the cross on your forehead three times – *“for the forgiveness of your sins, for the strengthening of your faith, and for the healing of your body, mind, or spirit in accordance with God's Will for your life.”* And then with a hand upon your head, there will be a simple prayer, something like:

“O Lord, empower my brother/sister with your Holy Spirit – to fulfill your purposes and to live in your peace. Amen.”

Anointing with Oil offered for all who wish to receive, while the congregation sings:

Hymns 504 *Have Thine Own Way, Lord*

505 *I Am Thine, O Lord*

507 *Gracious Spirit, Dwell with Me*