“The Sacred Act of Anointing the Sick”

Acts 5:12-16

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As a chaplain, I never quite got used to those middle of the night pages.

Now that I have an infant to take care for, I have night time wakings of a different sort.

With my current gig as mother, I’m getting the hang of knowing what to do when my whimpering alarm clock goes off.

She either needs to be fed or just comforted back to sleep.

But with that chaplain pager, there was no telling what I was being summoned for.

I would groggily reach over to the nightstand to check the massage on the beeper.

I’d then look around at my surroundings, trying to remember where I was.

This doesn’t look like my bedroom, I’d think.

Oh right, I’m in the on call room in the basement of Brackenridge Hospital.

A quick brushing of teeth and I’d head out to the hospital floor, saying prayers as I went, asking God to use me for whatever situation I was walking in to.

Most of the time I would find my rhythm and purpose in the hospital room.

The night shift nurses were often good at filling me in and preparing me for whatever emergency I was responding to.

But I always found myself a bit flustered when I would walk into a room and the patient or family member was requesting the sacrament of the sick.

Not being Catholic, I was no use to them in their need.

And, being the middle of the night, responding to this need was tricky.

The on call Catholic priest did not have a convenient on call room at the hospital.

He was asleep in the comfort of his own bed.

He was likely not thrilled about being called to the hospital in the middle of the night.

Whenever I would call the priest, he would grill me on the patient’s situation:

Is the person really Roman Catholic?

This sacrament is not available to a non-Catholic.

But how do I determine if they really are Catholic?

It’s not like they carry membership cards.

The next question: is this situation really an emergency? Or can it wait until morning?

I’m not a doctor, so I can’t speak to the person’s prognosis, but the staff seems to think the situation is urgent.

If I could convince the priest that yes, this person is Catholic and yes the situation is urgent, then he would agree to come in.

I would head back to the patient’s room to offer them support until the priest arrived.

When he did show up, the family always expressed relief that he was there and that the sacrament of the sick was available.

I would head back my on call room in the basement, where I’d try to catch a few ZZZ’s before the pager beckoned me once more.

I admit I often resented these situation.

Not just the part about being woken up in the middle of the night.

But as a minister, I wanted to be able to respond to a pastoral need in the hospital.

Offering the sacrament of the sick was not an element of care that I could provide.

At first I really struggled with this.

It annoyed me that I couldn’t take care of a need.

I was the on call chaplain after all.

I was supposed to be caring for the entire hospital.

I had a hard time understanding this ritual that the priest could offer.

We don’t have this sacrament in our Protestant tradition.

We don’t have a particular ritual to offer a person who is gravely ill.

I struggled to accept the legitimacy of this ritual.

What was the big deal about a little bit of olive oil?

Sure, it was blessed and declared sacred, but how could such an ordinary substance provide such peace of mind?

Then I would get envious that Catholics have such a Sacrament that ministers to a person in their time of need.

What I had to offer seemed so inadequate in comparison.

A prayer…a few words of encouragement…perhaps just being a comforting presense.

Perhaps you have felt a similar inadequacy.

When a friend is in the hospital and you want to do something that will “fix” their pain.

All of the words and flowers and cards seem to fall short.

We Protestants don’t have this sacrament – the anointing of the sick – which provides so much comfort to those in despair.

We did away with it back in the Protestant Reformation.

The Roman Catholic Church maintains Anointing of the Sick is a Sacrament.

Many refer to this as a person’s last rites, but it is much more than a deathbed assurance of salvation.

Roman Catholics view it as an act which gives grace for the state of those who are sick.

They believe this act is a gift of the Holy Spirit, one which provides comfort to the grieving, and ensures grace for those who are facing death.

They take their cue from Mark chapter 6, where the 12 disciples are sent to spread the gospel and are given the power to heal the sick by anointing with oil.

There is also mention in James chapter 5 where elders of the church are sent to pray for the sick and anoint them with oil, asking God for healing.

In our Protestant Church, we don’t interpret these passages as institutions of Christ.

Therefore we don’t consider anointing the sick to be a sacrament.

But that doesn’t mean we don’t value its intent.

We have our own version of this ritual, although it is much less formal.

We too see the need to anoint one another in times of need and despair.

We see in Acts 5 how healing has always been an integral act of ministry, especially for the early church.

The disciples were given the power through the Holy Spirit to heal those who were sick.

People who had physical or spiritual ailments would present themselves before the disciples, seeking healing and wholeness.

To be healed from sickness led a person on a faith journey.

Seeing the legitimacy of Jesus Christ through those disciples, many people came to the faith because of their healing.

This is still an integral part of how we share the Gospel with the world.

We recognize that it is hard for a person to believe in Jesus if they have a need like hunger or illness.

How can they understand the Gospel, if their bellies are growling or their chronic pain is flaring?

We see the need to respond to those ailments.

Not necessarily by curing people, but by offering healing comfort

We Presbyterians have a long history of meeting the needs of people.

This is our way of *showing* people the Gospel before *telling* them about the Gospel.

In areas where medical care is poor or non-existent, the Presbyterian Church has built hospitals.

Today our church maintains a partnership with those hospitals, and many of them are seen as prestigious, respectable institutions.

In places where education is poor or non-existent, the Presbyterian Church has built schools.

Our Church has helped bring educational resources to students of all ages all around the world.

In regions that have been hit by disasters, our church has responded with assistance.

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has brought healing to many whose lives have been torn apart.

These are just a few of the big ways that our denomination has responded to those in need of healing.

Offering medical help, or education, or recovery from a storm.

Rather than oil, we anoint people with resources and love.

On a more personal level, anointing of the sick can take many forms.

It might look like praying with a person in the hospital, or sitting with them in their time of need.

This informal version of the ritual lets a person know God loves them.

Anointing the sick might involve bringing a casserole to someone who has experienced loss/trauma/diagnosis.

This practical version of the ritual lets a person know they are loved.

This sacred act might take the form of walking alongside someone as they struggle with mental illness.

This powerful version of the act lets a person know that they are not alone in their darkness.

We Presbyterians don’t have a formal sacrament of anointing the sick.

But we practice this sacred act through our everyday care of one another.

When we show someone love and support, we anoint them with God’s love and share with them in their suffering.

The Rev. Becca Stephens makes an eloquent statement on this: she says that “healing is grounded in four of love’s basic axioms: love is eternal, love is sufficient, love is God unfolding in our lives, and love is not concerned with dogma so much as it is a dogged determination to bloom and speak.” She says that “the axioms of love are written into the fabric of creation, so it is right that in that fabric we find the gifts we need to heal one another.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

I find this definition of healing reassuring.

Whenever we read Scripture passages, like Acts 5, and wonder about that gift of healing, we can trust that God works through each of us to heal one another.

As a chaplain feeling inadequate because I can’t offer the ritual of anointing the sick, I can take comfort in knowing that healing comes in various forms.

I finally came to realize this when I would see the impact the sacrament of the sick had on a family.

It was always a grace filled moment of reassurance that the person is in God’s hands.

The person lying in that hospital bed felt God’s love through that anointing of oil.

I now start to pay attention to similar moments in my own church tradition.

When faithful stewards of God’s grace extend love filled gestures to those in need.

These gestures don’t usually involve oil.

But they always involve grace and love and healing.

As Presbyterians, we can take comfort in a broad understanding of anointing the sick.

We can trust that God works through us in a myriad of ways.

That healing comes about in creative, grace filled avenues.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

1. Becca Stevens, *Snake Oil: the Art of Healing and Truth-Telling*, Reprint ed. (New York: Jericho Books, 2014), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)