

Radix 14: Health, Healing, and Shalom

Opening Reflection by Dr. Jen Younggren | April 27, 2025

Good evening everyone and welcome to this plenary session for Radix 14. I am excited to speak to you tonight about a topic near and dear to my heart: healing. I love that Radix has taken this on as the theme for this session. The Radix project, with its focus on meeting in small groups for discussion and prayer, is such a vibrant example of community building. Supporting the growth of healthy, active, diverse and multigenerational communities, with multiple points of view, is, I think, an important ingredient in healing. I really thank all of y'all for being here tonight, and for contributing your time and energy to this process.

My name is Jen Younggren. I've been attending St. Mark's regularly since 2021, and I've been a full time practicing Emergency physician for 23 years. My faith and my relationship with God definitely inform my practice. And, I will say that my practice of medicine gives me a opportunity to deepen my relationship with God through interacting with other humans in intense and often life changing situations. As a physician, and as a fellow follower of Jesus, I'd like to offer some insights and questions into and around the concept of healing to share with you this evening.

First, I ask you to reflect on if you, yourself, feel like, or identify as, a healer. I would posit to you that you are, or are called to be.

In Tyler Staton's book about the Holy Spirit, called "The Familiar Stranger" he said something simple that resonated with me, which is that "God doesn't want a team with a few star players, God wants everyone to play."

In today's world, we often relegate healing to specific people, but it is all of our callings in our own sphere of influence. We can each do this work in our own way. We can heal our communities and help heal each other and our relationships with God.

Healing is not something constrained to just a select few. It's not just for doctors. It's not just for priests.

Now, this has to be through the lens of practical life. I'm not suddenly gonna call one of you in to run my next code, and I certainly don't think that Dean Steve is going to want one of us to wander up next Sunday and preside over the Eucharist. We each have our own roles to play. However, look at your own life, and your own profession or family life. In what aspects of your life can you be a healer? A concept that is helpful to me in thinking about this is microvocation. How you can make your job, your routine, sacred and healing for you and those around you.

A concrete example from my own work is that when I walk into any patients room, or more these days their section of the hallway, I remind myself that through my faith I believe that there is Christ present in each human being. I remember my baptismal promises to respect the dignity of every human being, and to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Now, I'm not gonna lie this is not always easy. When someone's high on meth, or otherwise not in their right mind, cursing at us and thrashing about...it's hard. When there is a life threatening situation going on in which someone has to give the orders and that person is me, it's hard. And, I work outside of Seattle, in a community where many of the folks I care for and work with hold political opinions that vary drastically from my own. Folks, it's hard. But it works. I can absolutely tell you that it has real, tangible goodness. In the way I approach my work, and feel about my workplace, and in the interactions that I have with patients and colleagues. It also clearly models something for my coworkers. Often younger nurses and techs, and even fellow attendings, will come up to me, and ask to talk with me about how I maintain a calm and loving presence in an extremely fast paced, and sometimes negative environment that can value being jaded or "tough" over being present

and open. And, while it's not always appropriate to talk explicitly about our Christian faith in a work environment, I feel it's always appropriate to embody the values of that faith. And I am here to tell you that people notice and respond. This, friends, is a form healing. Not the kind we measure with metrics and outcomes - there's of course plenty of that. But, this is healing in terms of how I and the people around me, including my patients and coworkers, feel about the job that we are doing, and I do believe that it helps us deliver better medical care. I also believe that there is a deeper healing going on, something more subtle and mysterious, that leaves each person in those encounters better for it. Seen, and whole.

I invite you to take that approach into your own life. Just take a second and think about it. If you're a mom or a dad, a lawyer, an accountant, a barista, or write code. Think about all of the marvelously different and unique people you interact with each day. Think about how your life can be enriched, and the lives of those around you can be juicy and spirit filled, if you bring your faith to those interactions. I strongly encourage you to try it, and I would love for you to get back to me about the results.

Second, I would like to talk about community, and the idea that community is the context of our deepest and most complete healing. Again from Tyler Staton in *The Familiar Stranger*, we are called to address "the great myth of our time, that we can be healed completely or most deeply in isolation and that community is somehow not necessary to my healing or yours."

In many of the biblical passages that you will explore in this series, an act of healing is followed by, or results in, a person's restoration to their community. Isolation from others was a crucial part of what needed God's healing to restore. As Jeff Chu says in his book *Good Soil*, "To be made whole isn't just to have one's physical affliction removed; it is to be restored to community and returned to relationship."

This is not to say that times of solitude or self reflection are not helpful. They definitely can be. But we as humans and the church are called to be together.

As we are told in Matthew 18, v. 20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” What a blessing to know and feel that, friends.

Especially in these times, when it seems like some of what we hoped would be our greatest technologies, instead of being used for good, are being wielded to fracture communities, to sow fear and distrust, and to isolate us from each other and from our better angels.

Radix is healing, because it strengthens community, and encourages us to gather and share ourselves with each other. A funny quote from “Familiar Stranger” is: “many Christians would much rather look into their Bible (or, maybe for us Episcopalians, the BCP...) than into the eyes of a fellow human being. We pray...” “Lord, I want to be close to you!”, yet never do anything to get close to the people around us.

And of course, we can meet God in personal, private spiritual practice, but we also meet God in other people, as long as we go looking for the same thing in both places - union with God. I encourage you to view the human connections, and disagreements, and new ideas, and friendships that you encounter and make through Radix, and in your lives, as a healing path that brings you and everyone around you closer to the kingdom, to union with God.

Finally, I want to talk about what I understand as a broader definition of healing, which is restoration of right relationship to other human beings, and to God, as opposed to our specific human understanding of fixing a specific problem as we’ve defined it.

Part of this discussion, I feel, requires that I address what sometimes can feel like the elephant in the room when we talk about healing in a church context. A lot of people get really uncomfortable, one way or another, often with good reason, when talking about faith and healing. We often have finite definitions of healing, which really, sometimes, are more based in the idea of fixing a problem.

I wanna say from the outset that I am not specifically addressing faith cures here. It is not for me to say what God can or cannot do, and the mystery of God is far beyond what I will ever be able to comprehend, much less wrap up neatly in this talk. But just in case anyone is listening to this and feeling like I'm rationalizing my way out of the possibility of faith cures, be assured I am not. They do happen. I certainly don't understand why or how, and I don't know that that's really the topic at hand. I think humans can get into murky waters when we try to come up with a faith based checklist or prescription for attaining a human defined outcome. So this is not that. I do want to focus here, on broadening our idea of healing and health, and being open to the various permutations of restoration and wholeness through God's grace.

Kate Bowler, in her two books "Everything Happens for a Reason: and Other Lies I've Loved" as well as "No Cure for Being Human: and Other Truths I Need to Hear" addresses receiving her colon cancer diagnosis, processing fear of imminent death, and subsequently living with that diagnosis and the ever present reminder of her own mortality, while living her life. In these books she discusses her personal experiences, but also explores the harm that can be caused to people when we attribute or correlate folks's troubles, or illnesses, to their lack of adequate faith. Bowler has a deep knowledge of prosperity gospel from research for her prior work, and cautions us to not align physical or material wellbeing and faith in a transactional way. Likewise, Debie Thomas, in her book "A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a more Spacious Christianity" addresses the hollowness that can result from a falsely sanguine Christianity, in which we assure people that everything is going to be fine and don't address or honor the nitty-gritty, often painful, truly human parts of being alive.

If we fall into these well worn and easy traps of our faith, it can effectively take away healing from the people who need it most, by somehow assigning the blame for the suffering onto the sufferer. Friends, I do not believe that this is what we are called to do.

Healing is a word that gets laden with expectations of total cures and neatly solved problems.

Life rarely works that way.

Sometimes, I think we can confuse healing, with fixing.

I invite you to think of problems that need fixing. Some examples from my own professional life would be things like a laceration, a fracture, a heart attack, an intractable nosebleed. These are problems to be fixed. Now, I would invite you to think about some things that need healing, things like community, isolation, our environment, a broken heart, a grieving friend, a personal relationship with someone in your life, or your own relationship to a substance.

Between these two groups of things, maybe start to see a difference. Communities and people and relationships are sacred and complex entities that need healing, not fixing. A person is not a problem to be fixed. A relationship is not a problem to be fixed. Many of the issues that we face today might stem from thinking about these as problems to be fixed, as opposed to entities that we have to work together as a community to understand, and heal.

This is not to say that there are not problems that need fixing. Goodness knows if you come to my hospital with an ankle fracture you're not gonna wanna start with me talking about the holistic healing of your entire being, body and soul. But, this is an area where I think each one of us can bring the healing power of Christ to our daily lives. This brings us back to microvocations. Look at your own life, your own profession, your interpersonal interactions and think about bringing your faith, and allowing for the possibility of grace, into those situations for healing.

The healing can happen on a deeper level, a more mysterious level. Sometimes on the edges of the business of fixing that we tend to focus on in our cut and dried scientific way of thinking about medicine and life. People, communities, relationships and souls aren't like lacerations, fractures, or blocked coronary arteries. We're not looking to fix the former in the way that we are the latter. We're looking for healing, restoration, wholeness - and that is more subtle and spirit filled.

Fixing problems can sometimes feel like it can be achieved through the brute force of our will, or the details of our skill set, and often problems can be fixed through the use of those things.

However, healing, I believe can really only come through God's grace. It sneaks in around the edges and intercalates itself in the interstitial spaces of our lives, to help us commune deeply with God. This is grace. It's nothing that we can force. It is freely given to us, and we are called to be channels of that Grace to other people and to the situations in our lives.

The passages that the Radix planning committee chose for this series offer a full palette of healing. Not just focussing on physical cure, although of course there are some that feature that, but also touching on community healing, healing from trauma or violence, and restoration to wholeness. I invite you, friends, to be open to the healing and grace that flows through these stories. May God's healing grace be present in your meetings, and spread out into the world, in the coming weeks.

Thank you.

Breakout Group Discussion Questions:

1. What area in your daily life could be an open channel for you to experience or share God's grace and healing? What might that look like?
2. Tell about a time in which your problems weren't all neatly wrapped up or fixed, yet you've felt a deep sense of healing, relief, or connection to God.