

Agnes Sanford, Christian, healing, prayer, ministry

Agnes Sanford: Pioneer in Healing Ministry And Apostle of the Healing Light of Christ

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Few Christians, either as individuals or congregations, can deny the pivotal place that healing held in Christ's earthly ministry, or that it holds - body, mind, and spirit - in Christian doctrine. But the laying hold of and rendering operational these doctrines in the life of the believer and in the normative life and mission of the Church has been a task largely ignored, enshrouded in mystery, rationalized, marginalized, or deemed irrelevant, either by theological design or neglect. Even after nearly a century of the Charismatic Renewal's quickening influence and refocusing on the Holy Spirit's gifts to the churches, many faithful and devoted believers are left perplexed and uncertain about the imponderables of Christian healing. Or worse, they wrestle with self-perceptions of being second-class citizens in a Kingdom of God peopled by self-assured voices claiming an inside track on the mysterious ways of the Spirit, leaving them the confounding burden of how to approach a healing Christ with their doubts, fears, their checkered and compromised psyches, and their infusion of the culture's knee-jerk secular bias. Do they keep hoping, against hope, keep trying to pump up their flagging faith to meet that invisible mark that some lucky ones seem to hit? Or do they just sadly put it down, knowing that there is, indeed, a Christ who heals, but perhaps not them, perhaps not now. Writer, teacher, and pioneer in healing ministry, Agnes Sanford has walked this very path, embracing the contradictions and searching out the mysteries of Christian healing. Her life-long struggle with her own brokenness and engagement with healing truths is meticulously detailed in her writings, providing fresh clues and new visions, new ways to apprehend and move into the Life-in-Christ healing context, laying to rest any notion of healing as product, as something I can *get* rather than something I *become* in an ever deeper walk with Christ-the Healer.

O God, the source of all health: So fill my heart with faith in your love, that with calm expectancy I may make room for your power to possess me, and gracefully accept your healing, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen
(Book of Common Prayer, Prayers for Use by a Sick Person for Trust in God)

Introduction

I think I could have gone a lifetime without ever hearing this prayer, without ever being stopped in my tracks to encounter the quiet words with the powerful truths of Christian healing. But the prayer was offered at the close of a small weekday Anointing service following Holy Communion in a large down-town Episcopal Church in my hometown, and I knew I had to find out where it was in the Prayer Book (*Book of Common Prayer*), write it down and give it more thought. So it is for many who want to understand the seeming mysteries of healing - the how's, the why's, the why not's, the yearning to believe, and the often-prayed, "Help thou mine unbelief!" We know, as Christians, that we worship a God who heals, but we sometimes stumble over unanswered questions. We strive to increase our faith, but we never quite know if we're getting it right. We have an ally in that search in the modern-day saint, mystic, teacher and writer Agnes Sanford. She asked the same questions and made it her life's work to find as many answers as God would give her. As a believer who struggled to find healing herself and to claim her identity in Christ, she searched out, experimented, and opened the way for healing ministry in churches even before the days of the Charismatic Renewal.

I remember my mother's stories back in the 50's and early 60's at the height of the Charismatic Renewal, of her experiences in the *Camps Farthest Out*, where Agnes often ministered - stories of the miraculous, but also wonderful stories of changed hearts and minds and lives. Those were exciting days of renewal and fervor in the hearts of Christians who wanted more of God, more than business-as-usual, more of the Life of God, both in their individual lives and in the life of their churches. But it was many years before I opened the books by Agnes that had sat on my mother's shelves for decades - *The Healing Light*, *Sealed Orders*, *Behold Your God* - and studied Agnes Sanford's work. Through this reading and attendance at a two-day seminar examining Agnes Sanford's role in bringing healing ministry back into the churches, I have begun to catch a glimpse into the healing essentials she sought to live and to teach. I can now see why the little *Prayer for Trust in God* was so compelling. It reflects,

simply and powerfully, some of those very essentials taught by Agnes Sanford. The prayer suggests the mind-set, the heart preparation, the attitude, if you will, for praying and receiving healing prayer:

- Seeing God as the source of all health.
- Knowing that God loves and wants us whole in body, mind, and spirit.
- Believing, accepting, and thanking God for the work He is doing.

The Life of Agnes Sanford: Learning God's Healing Ways

Mrs. Sanford's life-long search to understand and communicate in a practical way the deep mysteries of God's healing work in the life of the individual has helped us immeasurably to orient the whole of our being to healing ways. How instructive and refreshing, though not surprising, to realize that healing ways are holy ways! To follow Agnes Sanford's teaching on healing, one is inexorably drawn to the pursuit of holiness, to the essentials of Christian formation.

That healing is an intrinsic part of the Gospel's message was but a gradually unfolding conviction for Agnes in her journey from a daughter of Presbyterian missionaries in China; to life as wife of Father Ted Sanford, rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Moorestown, New Jersey; to renowned spiritual writer, lecturer, and teacher in Christian healing. In her autobiography, *Sealed Orders*, Agnes describes her early perplexity and restless puzzling over the question, "Does God heal?" She writes,

Perhaps the reader is thinking, "Well, of course!" But in those days it was not, "Of course." We were fundamentalists. That meant that we believed implicitly in every word in the Bible, yet we did not believe in healing through prayer. We were supposed to obey Jesus in every word that He said. Yet, when He said, "The works that I do shall ye do also," we didn't obey Him, and indeed considered it heresy that any one should try to do His works" (*Sealed Orders*, p. 49).

Her search for answers to the question was not an easy one, but the call to be an agent of healing was the subject of her early teen fantasies. "A few hundred years ago," she writes, "if I had dreamed of spiritual healing, they would probably have burned me for a witch. Nowadays, they might have me undergo deep therapy until all these wondering visions were ironed out, and I would be able to conform to my peers" (*Sealed Orders*, p. 51).

Agnes did not fully awaken to her vocation in healing and writing until she had gone through some dark years of depression and doubt. **The realization that God not only has the power to heal, but that He desires to impart healing, came ... in the midst of her own deepest pain.** First, she witnessed her baby boy's miraculous healing from a serious ear infection. Then Agnes herself was healed of her severe depression. Agnes writes of those dark days in *Sealed Orders* when an Episcopal minister came from a neighboring town on business to see her husband. He learned of the baby's sickness and offered to pray for him. "This surprised me greatly," she writes. "I believed in a vague, general way that God answered prayer for healing when He felt like it - unless for some reason He preferred for a person to remain ill. But why God would answer one person's prayer rather than another's, I could not imagine" (*Sealed Orders*, p. 97).

She described her own attempts at prayer for the baby,

I prayed continually, but always with fear and not with faith. "Oh, please make the baby well!" I would say and then I would go and feel his forehead to see how much his temperature had risen" (*Sealed Orders*, p. 96).

By contrast, the minister's prayer was calm, confident, relaxed:

"Now, you shut your eyes and go to sleep," he said to the baby. "I'm going to ask God to come into your ears and make them well. And when you wake up, you'll be all right" (*Sealed Orders*, P. 97).

His prayer, as I recall it, was just as simple as were these opening remarks. He laid his hands upon the baby's ears and kept them there for several minutes. "Please, Lord Jesus," he said, "Send your power right now into this baby's ears and take away all germs or infection and make them well. Thank you, Lord, for I believe that you are doing this, and I see these ears well as you made them to be" (*Sealed Orders*, p. 97)

The child was healed. Agnes writes, "The strange thing is that this did not immediately show me a new world. Instead, it perplexed me greatly. Why did God answer the minister's prayers when He had not answered mine? I did not know that I myself blocked my own prayers" (*Sealed Orders*, p. 98).

Not long after this, Agnes herself was healed of her severe depression and was told in no uncertain terms that she *must* write, and so fulfill her calling. The priest who had ministered to her baby, and through healing prayer and wise counsel had spoken life into her hopelessness, told her one day, "in the long run, you've got to learn the prayer of faith yourself" (*Sealed Orders*, p. 101). Agnes writes,

I looked at him noncommittally and thought, "I can never do that." But finally it came to me that since he was my mind-doctor and since he required it, I must try to pray as he suggested, *making in my mind the*

picture of what I wanted and thanking God that it was becoming so. Or better yet, that it was so, thinking in the ever-continuing present. So I would imagine my body strong and well, relieved of its accumulated pain and stress, and would say, "Thank you, God. Your power is working through me and I am doing this work in your strength." I did not in the beginning feel any immediate sense of relief. But I prayed the prayer of thanksgiving just the same. Many points were perplexing to me as I tried to pursue the path of faith. So I decided to read what Jesus Himself said about faith and about the way of life, and to follow Him and nobody else (*Sealed Orders*, p102).

Through intense and prayerful study and meditation of the Gospels, and then similar study of the rest of Scripture, Agnes came to understand ... "the reality of the spiritual body that interpenetrates the physical body ... and this entire being illumined with the saving love of Jesus Christ and with His Spirit, is I - the other one of me - the immortal one who will live some day in heaven" (*Sealed Orders*, p. 103, 104). Her prayers for healing began to reflect the reality of the spiritual self, illumined by the Holy Spirit, and oriented toward the person of Christ and the light of His presence in her life. These thoughts were developed over time and were expressed in *The Healing Light*, her definitive work on healing.

But the process of living the life of faith that produces the prayer of faith was no easy matter. Agnes writes,

There were still currents of thought, despairing and discouraged, and at times resentful, that ran through my heart or subconscious mind even while the conscious mind endeavored to pray. How could I train the unconscious flow of thoughts and pictures to dwell on God and not on man, on the spiritual kingdom and not on the temporal world? Books were not enough. For my subconscious had so many years been steeped in destructive thinking that it needed strong measures to fix it on Christ and on pictures of His love and peace and joy So for a year, I prayed whenever my mind was not actively engaged on something demanding its full attention, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, fill me with thy life" (*Sealed Orders*, p. 107). She writes a version of this prayer in *Behold Your God*, "Lord Jesus Christ, abide in me more and more, filling me with thy own life" (p. 25). Only later did she learn that her meditation was a slight variation of the Jesus Prayer, practiced by many generations of Christian disciples.

This prayer became more than a spiritual exercise for Agnes, but formed the basis of her understanding of healing prayer, either for herself or for someone else: to meditate on and to be filled with the life of Christ. She writes in *Behold your God*,

... For when He came upon this earth that starry night so long ago, He entered into humanity and he entered below the veil of time. He actually projects into those who receive Him that very Life and Light itself, so that He gives them what they must have in order to do the things that they were made to do: He gives them the "power to become the Sons of God" (John 1:7-12). ... **for an essential to our receiving any of the currents of God's power is that we ourselves by faith shall open the door to His action** (*Behold Your God*, p. 77,78).

By any other name, we would call this conversion, or a simple asking of Christ to fill us with Himself to save us, heal us, and empower us.

It is clear from her writings that Agnes Sanford's focus is not healing for its own sake, not escapism into New Age "Christ-mind," not a seeking into the sensational or the speculative. She does not give us an iron-clad formula, a short-cut to healing *or* to holiness. But she suggests a way, a path. She sends us in the right direction. And she is thoroughly orthodox and unfailingly scriptural. Agnes insists that when we seek healing or the power to heal, we must seek Christ the Healer, tune our minds to His mind, trust in His love and power, and believe that He hears us when we pray. She reminds us that "... while we touch the hem of His garment from time to time, we do not truly abide in Him. Only as we abide in Him, can we ask what we will, that it shall be done unto us" (John 15:7 and *Behold Your God*, p. 15).

Many chapters in her books are given to "learning" faith, "learning" and practicing forgiveness, "learning" love in place of hate and resentment. She makes it clear that this is not an "if you feel like it" enterprise. In writing about "re-educating" ourselves in love, she stresses the absolute importance of forgiveness: "As we practice the work of forgiveness we discover more and more that forgiveness and healing are one." Writing in *The Healing Light* (p. 60), Agnes tells us,

... so we learn faith by trying to understand that we are children of light and then correcting every thought that denies our glorious heritage of life and love **We must re-educate the subconscious mind, replacing every thought of fear with a thought of faith, every thought of**

illness with a thought of health, every thought of death with a thought of life (*The Healing Light*, p. 33).

In her books Agnes Sanford describes in great detail and authenticity the slow and difficult path of “learning” and bringing to life her own faith. The simple prayer of faith that she learned in the beginning grew as she deepened the foundational faith and practice of abiding in Christ, who is our Light and who is the Healer. Thus in her teaching on praying the prayer of faith, Agnes suggests first that one relax, letting go of tension, quieting the mind and body and letting go of all urgency.

“Be still and know that I am God...” And so that you are still, let your spirit enter into the spiritual kingdom. Imagine your spirit ascending through the heavens and into the presence of God. Keep the mind firmly and unwaveringly fixed on Jesus Christ. Meditate, then, upon the mysteries of God hidden in His holy birth, in His sacrificial life among men, in His redemptive passion and in His life-giving ascension. Most of all, strive to discern His presence in the profound mysteries of the Communion Service, which He gave that we might see Him face to face and that we might “touch and handle things unseen...” (*Behold Your God*, p.17, 18).

... then in order to know Him, by perceiving His working in your own being, turn your mind to those parts of you that you can know and see: your mind and your body. Imagine His light shining into your body and quickening therein the flow of life, so that you will have more abundant life for doing His work. If any part of your body needs to be strengthened or healed, vision His light there, recreating in perfection that which He created in the beginning. Put your mind directly into that part of your body and see it burning with the fire of His creative energy. Then make an act of faith, and picture this part of your body well and strong ... (*Behold Your God*, p. 19).

... having made this picture by faith, you can now say by the same faith, “Thank thee, heavenly Father, because I believe that the life of thy Spirit is now with me working toward health and strength” (*Behold Your God*, p. 19).

Agnes insists that as we are filled more and more with the life of God, we must pass it on to others. “He who created our lives, fills us with the desire to re-create the little broken ones upon this earth” (*The Healing Light*, p. 93). In our own power, or even our own power to love, we can do little. “But we need only to connect our human love with the divinely human love of Jesus Christ in order to charge it with power (*The Healing Light*, p. 94).

In praying for another, the initial steps are the same: becoming quiet before God, directing our thoughts to Him to fill us with His thoughts and His love. Agnes writes, “The essence of all healing is to become so immersed in the being of God that one forgets himself entirely. And the most successful prayers are those in which the one who prays never thinks of himself at all. He immerses himself first in God and then in his patient (*The Healing Light*, p. 110). As in the prayer of faith, we contemplate Christ, His sufferings, and we thank Him and pray for His indwelling. **Agnes adds that in thinking of the person needing prayer, one must see the person well, whole, and happy. She suggests we “... create in our minds the picture of that person well.** Thus we set in motion our powers of creating” (*Behold Your God*, p. 34). As we pray for another, we offer ourselves – body, mind, spirit – and our human love for the other to Christ to be the ground through which He moves to touch and heal the other. Agnes graphically describes this process as holding God by one hand and man with the other hand. The prayer is completed with thanksgiving; and “... every prayer,” she writes should end with this strong command: “So be it;” “Amen.”

Conclusion

In considering the life and work of one of the central and pivotal pioneers of healing ministry in the last century, we recognize through her writings, a very human and a very honest seeker, much like ourselves, who stumbled, doubted and became severely depressed. But she would not, by God’s grace and her own stubborn persistence, abandon her quest to understand the Healing Christ and healing in the life of the Christian. Her books make clear that Agnes Sanford had a vocation, a calling to healing ministry and that she had the gift of healing in terms of the “gifts of the Spirit.” But she also makes it clear that **participation in healing prayer should be a normative part of the Christian life and experience.** It is she who has forged ahead and cleared a path for us to begin to understand. Her autobiography reads like a modern-day Jacob, who wrestles all night with the Angel of the Lord and tells him, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” The fruit of her struggle has been a theology of healing that moves it out of the pages of the Gospels and into the real lives of believers as they strive to practice their faith. Agnes Sanford dared to believe our Lord, who told us, “I am the light of the world,” (John 8:12) and then told His followers, “Ye are the light of the world ... whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Matthew 5:14, *emphasis mine*).

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