

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

We can be kind of envious of the people who encountered Jesus while he was carrying out his ministry in Galilee and Judea. Nowhere in the Gospel do we hear of him having to say to someone, “Sorry, there’s nothing I can do for you.” Every time someone comes to him for healing, they are healed. Sometimes he heals people even without them asking!

And yet, our experience of praying to Jesus for healing and what comes after is mixed. There are times when a person prays for a cure for what ails them and it happens, but there are also times when no cure comes. And that hurts. It causes confusion and forces us to question whether we have done the praying right, or whether God really cares, or a myriad of other questions which seem to have no answers.

Any spiritual writer worth his or her salt has to avoid providing glib answers to the problem, because it has been around for so long and many pious minds have grappled with it without coming to a totally satisfactory conclusion.

And yet, there have been helpful perspectives that come down to us. One of those is to be able to recognize that even in those cases where an illness is not cured, a person can experience healing.

The novelist John Updike wrote once in a poem of his experience of inner healing that accompanied a period of sickness:

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I have brought back a good
message from the land of 102 degrees:
God exists.
I had seriously doubted it before;
but the bedposts spoke of it with utmost
confidence,
the threads in my blanket took it for granted,
the tree outside the window dismissed all
complaints,
and I have not slept so justly for years.
It is hard, now, to convey
how emblematically appearances sat
upon the membranes of my consciousness,
but it is the truth long known,
that some secrets are hidden from health.

(“Fever” from *Collected Poems, 1953-93* [New York: Knopf, 1993] 28)

During my year of internship as a hospital chaplain, my supervisor never tired of reminding us that we were entering a privileged moment with the patients we would visit. The normal routine had exited and they were left vulnerable, not only to the sickness that had brought them there, but to thoughts that were not their common fare, and experiences of God that would be quite new to them.

In cases too many to number patients reported that healing was taking place, independent of what they had been diagnosed with, and independent of the efforts of the hospital staff, and independent of their ultimate prognosis.

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The healing was occurring in areas of their life beyond their physical condition. Some patients reported a greater sense of being alive and in communion with others when they were sick. Others noted how much more grateful they had become and appreciative of small blessings they had always overlooked before.

When those who were cured returned to normal life, and its tendency to pull us in a million different directions at once, they had to deal with the daily routine which actually threatened to undo the spiritual healing that had occurred.

This is the same challenge the Gospel presents, only in a different context. Jesus' cures and exorcisms are signs of the kingdom of God. That's his primary concern and the overriding motivation for his healing activity. People are supposed to interpret these signs as God's loving response to human need in whatever form it takes.

And this interpretation is meant to change minds and initiate new ways of being with one another. Just to remain dazzled by the miraculous activity is to miss the point.

When it comes to Simon Peter's mother-in-law there's evidence that she was both cured and healed. The cure provides physical relief but it is also accompanied by profound healing. When she is able, she feels compelled to get up from her bed and be of service.

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Healing reconnects us to the deepest center of ourselves and through that center to God and neighbor. The flow of life and love through communion with God, self, and neighbor results in the dignity of service, which is the hallmark of the new humanity that Jesus came to establish.

Suffering can open us to healing because it has the potential to move us away from our pet ways of interacting with one another, and into a more profound contact. The healing may or may not result in a cure of a physical ailment.

The Gospel is replete with stories of how Jesus cured the sick, but it also points the way to healing that can take place beyond the immediate physical condition.

Jesus works holistically to bring people to the fullness of salvation. Curing the sick can be a part of that, but the deeper reality of restoring us to full and intimate contact with God and with one another is never far behind.

As we pray for healing, we can always pray for a cure for what ails us. Why wouldn't we do that? But the person of deeper faith will not want to stop there, and will take the occasion of our suffering as an invitation to count on God more than we have, to trust in his mercy and love, and above all in his promise that where he is we also will be.