

Healings and Cures

When I was in Africa, the bishop I stayed with, Bishop Reuben, told us the story of his then 11 year old son who had a bone marrow disease that left him unable to produce red blood cells.

After over 40 blood transfusions, the doctors told the family the boy needed a bone marrow transplant or he would die soon.

Except, the transplant cost \$100,000 and the family made maybe \$100 per month.

The boy, on the return trip from the capital city of Nairobi to their small town on the other side of the country, reminded his dad, then an Anglican priest, of Jesus throwing out the demon from the epileptic boy.

"Dad, when Jesus cured the boy, he told the spirit to never come back.

When you pray for me, you pray for a cure but you don't order the disease to never return."

When they arrived home, Reuben told his elderly parents the grim news that their grandson would likely die within the month.

That night, thinking more of the boy's comment about prayer, Reuben and his brother Robert stood at either end of the boy's bed, and prayed their hearts out that the illness killing the boy leave him and never return.

The boy went to sleep as did the rest of the family.

The next morning the grandfather opened the chicken coop to let the chickens out.

The young boys, like Reuben's son, were charged with keeping hawks at bay since the hawks often waited for the chicks to emerge -- breakfast for the hawks!

Reuben's boy was too weak for months to take up this task, but something changed that morning.

The boy came running out into the yard, picked up stones, and kept the hawks away.

He then went back to lay down.

A few days later, taking the boy to the local doctor to test his red cell count, the doctor asked if the boy just received a transfusion.

"No, he didn't," came the reply.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because his red cell count is nearly normal."

A few more days pass, another test, and his count is normal.

This happened over 20 years ago, and the boy, now a man, is a university graduate.

Healing became a cure.

She was only 38 when the diagnosis of terminal illness came.

For a few months, there was rage and despair at the unfairness of it all.

Four young children still needing to be raised.

A husband to love.

A new career just beginning in a field she adored.

How could God do this to her?

To them?

But as the months passed, and the diagnosis did not change, she began to change how she saw the diagnosis.

It slowly became an entry way into the suffering of so many others — when it used to be so easy to say "I know how you feel," now she really did know.

And it became an entry way into God; a faith that had been strong before, now took on deep mystery, profound insight, and a glow that is usually reserved for pregnant women.

In a sense, she was pregnant, not with a child, but with an expectation that she was moving, sooner than she wished, but moving nevertheless, into the far country where God may be known face to face.

When she died that February morning, with a loud groan and a great exhaling of air, it was as if her spirit filled the whole house, before moving upward and outward into the great mystery that awaits us all.

There was no cure, but there was profound healing.

Fred was his name.

He too received a terminal diagnosis.

And after a brief period of distress, he says, "something amazing happened.

I simply stopped doing everything that wasn't essential, that didn't matter."

His terminally ill life became vital and peaceful.

But the doctors changed their mind.

What he had was rare, but not terminal.

It could be cured.

"Fred says: 'When I heard this over the telephone, I cried like a baby — because I was afraid my life would go back to the way it used to be!'" P. Senge, Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future, 25-6.

There was a cure, but would there be healing?

We live in a country and in a culture obsessed with cures, but our faith gently reminds us that really it is the healing that matters most of all — and healing can always happen, even without, and sometimes even despite, a cure.

This truth is hammered home in Mark's gospel today.

Mark continues his rapid-fire reflections on the ministry of Jesus; and what you can't miss is that where Jesus is; there is life, not death, there is healing, not sickness, there is presence, not absence.

From Peter's mother-in-law who, upon her recovery becomes the very first deacon, serving those in need; to the whole town of Capernaum, where the sick are healed, disease is routed, and devils are put to flight.

This is what the Kingdom of God looks like, this is God's activity in the world.

And yet, there is Bernice's death; Christine's cancer; Sendichy's faltering kidney.

There are the starving poor in Somalia, the malnourished children in our own Appalachia, in our own Palama.

And it is here, where the finger of God touches the tragedies of this fallen world, that the call to seek healing, and not necessarily a cure, invites us into deep contemplation.

In the midst of all his healing, Jesus leaves town long before sunrise, heading off to the desert, off to the deserted places, to pray.

Jesus goes to the desert because it is in the desert, in places of desolation, that we can get closest to God.

I don't know why that is really, but it seems that desolation, which can come in the form of a lonely place or a cancer diagnosis, opens windows that are not otherwise readily opened, windows that allow us to peer into the profound mystery that is our life.

As John Updike once said: "Some secrets are hidden from health."

Jesus heals those in desolate circumstances; then heads for the desolate places to encounter the Father.

And I wonder if what we are to take from the desolation that will invariably arise in your life, in mine, is not that it is caused by God; but that when it comes, God is waiting, as always, only now, perhaps we can see, perhaps we can hear, the still, small voice that longs to assure us that we are each of us beloved children of the God who gathers the outcasts, who heals the brokenhearted, who binds up our wounds.

And who better to do so than the very one who was wounded by us, and for us, so that we might hope in his steadfast love.

In the end, it is the cross, that horrific reality of human sadism; that eternal symbol of the desolation God endures in order to bring us home.

It is the cross that makes it safe to venture out onto the tightrope of faith, seeking the miracle of healing, even if a cure is not in the cards, because Jesus has shown us that death is not the worst thing.

Death is even now defeated.

And the God who is faithful to us in life is faithful to us even in death.

This is the message of Jesus Christ: proclaimed in Galilee, proclaimed to the ends of the earth!

Tell it again when you leave this place today!

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