

Extending the Healing Touch of Jesus

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He had heard about him for months. He had heard stories about the healings and cures. Would he do the same for him? He had been isolated and separated from the community for so long. He didn't understand what he had done to deserve to be stricken with the dreaded disease. He tried to live a good life. What had he done or not done to deserve this? His friends and family told him that he must have done something. After all, leprosy was a curse from God, or so they said. The emotional and psychological pain was almost unbearable. The alienation from the community was especially painful. It had been so long since someone had touched him—since he felt the warmth of human contact.

So he approached Jesus and begged for healing. And what he received was nothing short of astonishing. He couldn't help but tell everyone he saw about his encounter with Jesus.

It happened in a simple human act—Jesus reached out and touched him. Actually, what happened was revolutionary. According to Jewish purity laws, to touch an unclean person resulted in one also being unclean. Contact with such persons as this leper demanded an elaborate ritual of purification. However, Jesus touched the leper, he touched the dead. He touched all who were hurting and in need. And, they were healed.

So many were healed after their encounter with Jesus: the blind ... the deaf ... the mute ... the paralyzed. Even the dead were resuscitated! But, all of those people got sick again one day and died. Believing in Jesus doesn't immunize us against sickness, suffering and disease.

For Jesus, it was never just about the cure. It was, instead, about reaching out and touching those who were hurting, frightened, suffering, and reminding them that pain, fear and suffering do not have the last word.

For those who believe in Jesus, not even death has the last word. If Jesus healed only because he was a compassionate person, we would look to him as a model, an example, and nothing more. There is a deeper meaning to Jesus' healing activity: Jesus' compassion is the manifestation of God's love!

For Catholics, one of the most visible and tangible signs of Jesus' healing presence is the ministry of Catholic health care. Catholic hospitals, free standing emergency centers, outpatient surgery centers, imaging centers, infusion centers, physicians'

offices, clinics, nursing homes and hospices are places where the healing ministry of Jesus should be most clearly present.

The people who come to those sites are all sick and frightened. They are seeking healing. Like that leper in the gospel, some believe that their disease or illness is punishment from God for things done or not done. Some may feel anger toward God because of their illness and guilt because of that anger. Some feel that they have become a burden to their families. Some might be thinking that the only way to face what lies ahead with dignity is assisted suicide. Some feel ostracized, isolated and alone, especially the mentally ill and those suffering from diseases that are communicable. Physicians and nurses old enough to remember the AIDS crisis in the 1980's tell me stories of colleagues who refused to enter an AIDS patient's room because they feared contracting the disease. We hear of similar reactions now with the current Ebola outbreak.

How do we respond to people when they are seriously ill? How can we be a healing presence to them? What lessons can we glean from the gospel? Let's reflect on two ways:

First, we can reach out and touch those who are ill. Health care today is an amazing combination of science and technological brilliance. All of us have benefited from the advances of medicine. Sometimes, however, what is lost is the power of human presence and touch. In all of the healing miracles of Jesus, there is one constant: Jesus reached out and physically touched people. Not only that, Jesus went out in search of people who were hurting. He went into villages and into crowds and touched those he encountered.

Somehow, we've been led to believe that we aren't caring for a patient if we aren't rushing the arsenal of medical technology to the bedside, or running tests or poking a person with a needle. We have to remember there comes a time when medicine cannot cure. However, health care can always provide compassionate care.

The simple act of touching someone and showing empathy and concern is healing. Human touch accompanied by words as simple and powerful as, "I can't imagine what this is like for you, but I want you to know that I'm here for you. You are not alone." Isn't that what Jesus did? Isn't that what we are called to do? Every "touch" matters, as do the tone of our voice and body language.

Second, we can actively listen. Along with the complexity of medical technology is the complexity of medical language. Jesus listened to those he encountered. He calls us to do the same thing. It's challenging. It's hard to get behind the words, the anger, the criticizing, the demanding nature of some patients and their loved ones. I know when I'm sick, I'm not my best self. Why should we expect any more from other people when they are sick?

If we work in health care, explaining complicated medical language, asking if a patient and family understand what the doctor just said, asking if there is anything else that we can do before leaving the room is essential. All of these actions demonstrate that we are listening and that the focus of our concern is the patient. Listening and compassionately responding is another way we reveal the healing Christ.

For those who do not work directly in health care, we are still called to touch and listen to the sick and to help them know they are not alone and that we are there for them. This may be as simple as calling a parishioner who has recently come home from the hospital and seeing if they need anything from the grocery store, a hot meal or transportation to a doctor's appointment. It means calling or visiting our loved ones who are homebound or living in nursing homes so they know they are not forgotten. We are not called to solve or remove medical problems, but rather to manifest God's love, respect and compassion.

Many times the result of medical technology and medicine will not produce the outcomes we hope for. There won't always be a cure. There comes a time when we transition treatment goals from cure to care. But, we still have the opportunity to reveal the saving, healing Christ to all the sick and marginalized whom we encounter.

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin suggested that the distinctive vocation in Christian health care is not so much to heal better or more efficiently than anyone else; it is to bring comfort to people by giving them an experience that will strengthen their confidence in life. The ultimate goal of our care is to give to those who are ill, through our care, a reason to hope.

This is the calling of the Catholic health ministry whether that care is taking place in our Catholic health facilities, parishes or our homes.

How have you embodied the healing Christ? How will you bring the healing Christ to the people you will meet this week?