

HEALING AND RECONCILIATION IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE

by Francis J. Buckley



(Editor's note: Father Francis J. Buckley, S.J. is chairman of the Department of Theology and Religious studies at the University of San Francisco.)

In the gospel according to Luke Jesus sets the tone for his ministry by citing a text from the prophet Isaiah: "*The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted and to heal the broken-hearted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind....*" (Lk 4:18)

Right from the start, then, the theme of Jesus' mission is curing and healing. Why?

HEALTH AND SICKNESS

Physical health is a symbol of spiritual health. In a healthy body all parts are in the right order and relationship: hands and arms, head and shoulders, legs and feet interact, cooperate, help one another. Each person should have a healthy relationship with God; other people help us maintain that proper order.

Sickness attacks healthy relationships. Once started, infection is beyond personal control, weakens the system, lowers resistance, and leads to lassitude, even to death. This is true not only for individuals; epidemics threaten the entire community.

What pestilence and disease do to natural life, sin does to the spiritual life. No wonder that blindness, deafness, paralysis, lameness, leprosy, and death have deeper meanings in the gospel! They point beyond themselves to the spiritual sickness of sin.

DIAGNOSIS

The Old Testament had presented God as Yahweh the Healer (Ex 15:26; Dt 32:39), who binds up wounds (Ho 6:1; Ez 34:16). The incarnation makes this healing God visible, audible, tangible.

Jesus the divine physician diagnoses: he sees beyond the surface, sees through all defenses and barriers, for he reads the human heart (Lk 5:22; 6:8; 9:47; 11:17; 24:38). "*Good people produce goodness from the good in their hearts: bad people draw what is bad from the store of badness. For the words of the mouth overflow from the heart*" (Lk 6:45).

Not all disease is caused by sin. In the Old Testament some illnesses were seen to be trials testing the patience and fidelity of good people like Job and Tobit; Jesus likewise called a crippled woman a victim of evil forces, "*a daughter of Abraham whom Satan has held bound these eighteen years*" (Lk 13:16).

On the other hand Deuteronomy (28:21-35) and Psalm 38 had presented some sickness as a punishment for sin. And Jesus also compared himself to a doctor sent to heal the sickness of sin: "*It is not the well who need the doctor, but the sick. I have come to call not the upright but sinners to repentance*" (Lk 5:31-32; 4:23-27).

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR HEALTH

Because Jesus knows human strengths and weaknesses, he prescribes the right medicines:

-Putting God first

"*Human beings live not on bread alone*" (Lk 4:4; Dt 8:3). "*You must do homage to the Lord your God, him alone must you serve*" (Lk 4:8; Dt 6:13). "*Do not put the Lord your God to the Test*" (Lk 4:12; Dt 6:16).

"*No servant can be the slave of two masters: he will either hate the first and love the second, or be attached to the first and despise the second. You cannot be the slave both of God and of money....What is highly esteemed in human eyes is loathsome in the sight of God*" (Lk 16:13-15).

"*Pay Caesar what belongs to Caesar--and God what belongs to God*" (Lk 20:25).

-Humility

"*Everyone who raises himself up will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be raised up*" (Lk 14:11).

-Compassionate, generous love

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you....Give to everyone who asks you...Treat others as you would like people to treat you....Lend without any hope of return. You will have a great reward, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Lk 6:27-35).

"Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate....Forgive, and you will be forgiven....Take the log out of your own eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take out the splinter in your brother's eye" (Lk 6:36-42).

"When you give a lunch or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relations or rich neighbors, in case they invite you back and so repay you. No; when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; then you will be blessed, for they have no means to repay you and so you will be repaid when the upright rise again" (Lk 12:15).

-Detachment

"Watch, and be on guard against avarice of any kind, for life does not consist in possessions" (Lk 12:15).

"Do not worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Think of the ravens. They do not sow or reap; they have no storehouses or barns; yet God feeds them. And how much more are you worth than the birds! Can any of you, however much you worry, add a single cubit to your span of life? If a very small thing is beyond your powers, why worry about the rest?" (Lk 12:22-26)

"Sell your possessions and give to those in need. Get yourselves purses that do not wear out, treasure that will not fail you, in heaven where no thief can reach it and no moth destroy it. For wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be too" (Lk 12:33-34)"

"Anyone who comes to me without hating father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, cannot be my disciple. No one who does not carry his cross and come after me can be my disciple. And indeed, which of you here intending to build a tower, would not first sit down and work out the cost to see if he had enough to complete it?...So in the same way, none of you can be my disciple without giving up all that he owns" (Lk 14:25-33).

-Fidelity

"Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another is guilty of adultery, and the man who marries a woman divorced by her husband commits adultery" (Lk 16:18).

-Vigilance

"See that you have your belts done up and your lamps lit. Be like people waiting for their master to return from the wedding feast, ready to open the door as soon as he knocks....You too must stand ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Lk 12:35-40).

"Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened by debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life, and that day will come upon you unexpectedly, like a trap" (Lk 21:34-35; 3:5-15; 17:26-30)

-Acting on Principles

"Everyone who comes to me and listens to my words and acts on them...is like the man who, when he built a house, dug and dug deep, and laid the foundations on rock" (Lk 6:47-48).

"The lamp of your body is your eye. When your eye is clear, your whole body, too, is filled with light: but when it is diseased your body, too, will be darkened. See to it then that the light inside you is not darkness"(Lk 11:34-35).

TREATMENT

Jesus, the wise physician, is tender, kind, compassionate, respectful. When people in pain come to him, each one experiences God's undivided attention (Lk 4:39-40; 5:12-14;17-25; 6:6-11; 7:11-17; 36-50; 8:19-21; 26-39; 44-48; 9:37-43; 10:38-42; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; 18:35-43; 19:1-10). Sinners feel comfortable, understood, loved, welcomed. Indeed, one of the charges made by his enemies is, "*He welcomes sinners and eats with them!*" (Lk 5:30; 15:2)

At the time of Jesus, both sickness and sin banished their victims to the outskirts of the community. Fear of physical or spiritual contagion led cautious people to avoid the company of lepers, corpses, public sinners, and foreigners (who did not share the faith of Israel). They were like rents in the social fabric, wounds in the body politic. It is no accident that Jesus is so frequently portrayed as reaching out to people on the fringes of society, the outcast and marginalized: the tax collectors Levi and Zacchaeus (Lk 5:27; 19:1-10): the public sinner who washed his feet in perfume and dried them with her hair (Lk 7:36-51); lepers (Lk 5:12-16; 17:11-19) and the woman with a haemorrhage (Lk 8:43-48); the dead daughter of Jairus (Lk 8:49-56) and the son of the widow of Naim (Lk 7:11-17). In healing them, Jesus not only reconciled them to God: he restored them to their families, welcomed them into the band of his disciples, and reintegrated them into society.

The clearest connection between healing and forgiveness was made in

the healing of the paralytic (Luke 5:17-26): "*Which of these is easier: to say: Your sins are forgiven you, or to say, Get up and walk? But to prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,*" he said to the paralyzed man, "*I order you: get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home.*" And immediately before their eyes he got up, picked up what he had been lying on and went home praising God.' The physical healing becomes a sign of spiritual healing from sin; the cure confirms the claim to forgive, the words clarify the meaning of the restoration to health.

SICKNESS AND SIN

Jesus always saw in sickness a symbol of sin, sometimes a consequence of sin, always a sign of Satan's power. His many healings and cures (Lk 6:17-19) showed his own power over sickness and Satan, just as he had triumphed over Satan in the temptation scene in the desert after his baptism (Lk 4:1-13). Peter made this same point in his speech to the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius in Acts 10:38: "*Because God was with him, Jesus went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil.*"

Jesus felt sorry for the victims of sin, both those sinned against and the sinners themselves. Jesus' actions showed compassion for all those whom sin had wounded. For sin is not a game in which one side wins; sin makes losers of everyone, but the sinner loses the most--one who stores up treasure for himself instead of becoming rich in the sight of God is a fool (Lk 12:16-21). Such self-indulgence is self-destructive. The price is eternal life (Lk 9:26; 10:13-15; 12:9; 42-48; 13:22-30; 16:19-31; 17:1-2).

Jesus did not romanticize sin. He knew how tax collectors collaborated with the Romans to oppress the common people and squeeze from them as much money or goods as they possibly could. He knew how soldiers from the occupying army brutalized the inhabitants of the land: the horde of devils who dwelt in the Gerasene demoniac, driving him out into the wilds to live among tombs and ultimately to self-destruction, were named "Legion", the very title of the troops (Luke 8:26-39). Jesus had personally experienced the refusal of the Samaritans to extend ordinary hospitality to Jewish pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate a feast (Lk 9:51-53).

Jesus did not explain away responsibility for sin, blaming it all on the sinners' parents or on society or on some economic or political system. He held the rich man personally to blame for not seeing the

beggar Lazarus who lay at his gate and not lifting a finger to help him (Lk 16:19-31). He told a parable in which someone was punished for wrapping a talent in cloth and burying it in the ground instead of putting it in a bank where it could have earned interest (Lk 19:11-27). Another parable described tenant farmers who refused to pay rent, and even killed those sent by the landowner (Lk 10:9-19). He drove traders from the temple, saying they had made God's house of prayer into a den of thieves (Lk 19:45-46). He warned people of the consequences of their sins and told them to stop (Lk 8:4-15; 10:13-16; 11:29-32; 37-52; 17:1-3).

NEW HORIZONS

Jesus not only told them to stop; he enabled them to stop. His gracious welcome awakened hope. His physical healings aroused trust. His teachings opened up new horizons, new ways of thinking and evaluating:

-New values

How blessed are you who are poor: the kingdom of God is yours.

Blessed are you who are hungry now; you shall have your fill.

Blessed are you who are weeping now: you shall laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice when that day comes and dance for joy. Your reward will be great in heaven" (Luke 6:20-23).

The poverty-stricken widow who puts two small coins into the temple treasury has given more than anyone else (Luke 21:1-3).

-New insights into suffering

Some people arrived and told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with that of their sacrifices. At this he said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than any others, that this should have happened to them? They were not, I tell you. No; but unless you repent you will all perish as they did" (Lk 13:1-3).

-New possibilities

"What shall I compare the kingdom of God with? It is like the yeast a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour till it was leavened all through" (Lk 13:20-21).

"Look, the kingdom of God is among you!"

"There will be weeping and grinding of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrown out. And people from east and west, from north and south, will come and sit down at the feast in the kingdom of God. Look, there are those now last who will be first, and those now first who will be

last" (Lk 13:22-30).

Many of Jesus' parables challenged cultural presuppositions about God's attitudes and human priorities--and were especially appealing to sinners. A detested Samaritan becomes the model of fulfilling the Mosaic law (Lk 10:29-37). The man who gave a great banquet sends his servants out to "*bring in here the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame,*" and says, "*Not one of those first invited shall have a taste of my banquet*" (Lk 14:17-24). The good shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep in the desert to go after the stray, joyfully puts it on his shoulders, and gathers his friends and neighbors for a party--"*In the same way, I tell you, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner repenting than over ninety-nine upright people who have no need of repentance*" (Lk 15:4-7). The father (with the heart of a mother) welcomes home the son who had squandered his inheritance, restores him to his place in the family, and says, "*We will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found*" (Lk 15: 23-24). The Pharisee goes home from the temple disgraced; the tax collector is forgiven (18:9-14). The tenants who refuse to pay rent to the owner of the vineyard will lose the vineyard and their lives (Lk 20:9-19).

These parables not only told about God welcoming sinners back, they taught that the rest of the community must also welcome them back and rejoice. His own example reinforced this. He welcomed Levi and Zacchaeus (Lk 5:27; 19:1-10), praised the depth of love in the heart of the woman in the home of Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7:36-51), cured the Roman centurion's servant (Lk 7:1-10), refused to take revenge against inhospitable Samaritans (Lk 9:51-56), touched and healed the ear of the high priest's servant who had been sent to capture him (Lk 22:50-51), asked his Father to forgive those who nailed him to the cross (Lk 23:33-34), and pardoned the thief who repented, promising that he would be with him that very day in paradise (Lk 23:39-43).

CONCLUSION

Thus healing and reconciliation in the Gospel according to Luke are both physical and spiritual, personal and social, restoring sinful humans to healthy relationships to God and the community. This important image of healing, as the embodiment of active love and care, is the equivalent in Luke of Paul's image of the body of Christ (Rm 12:4-6; 1 Co 6:15; 12:12-27), John's image of the vine and the branches (15:1-16), and Matthew's last judgment scene (25:31-46): what we do to others we do to Jesus himself, and it affects our relationship with God forever.