

When Healing is Hell

Mark 1:21-28

One of the things I have discovered over the course of my life is that I have a high sensitivity to pain meds. It doesn't take much to make me feel better. However, I've also recently discovered it's not a simple matter to stop taking them.

In the first week or two following my surgery last August, I was given Vicodin, which is something I don't believe I'd ever had. In fact, to my knowledge, until then I'd never taken anything in the class of drugs now known (notoriously) as "opioids." Apparently, it was needed, since the post-operative pain can be overwhelming, I'm told. Happily, my post-surgical pain wasn't, as I was taking my Vicodin pill faithfully every six hours as prescribed. Truthfully, I was feeling quite wonderful and even amazed my physical therapists by hitting 12,000 steps on my Fitbit walking around town within a week after my hospital stay!

However, after about ten days, I concluded I didn't need the Vicodin anymore—I was feeling just fine! I could graduate back to Advil or Tylenol, my normal course of treatment (as Wendy reminds me, I also could have consulted Dr. Hutchins for guidance as to how to do this). Instead, I went cold turkey and I became one in short order. Within 24 hours I felt like I was coming down with the flu and couldn't find a comfortable position, standing, lying down, or sitting. I was miserable, I was achy, I was cranky, and, apparently, I was well on my way to becoming addicted. How do I know? The first thing I wanted to do was take a Vicodin!

Well, it only took two or three days of this before I was finally detoxed, largely because my dosage wasn't extreme or longstanding. But it awakened me to an important reality. Opioids are very powerful drugs and

it doesn't take much to become dependent on them, unless you are careful and quick in weaning yourself from them. In a matter of days, I had a new appreciation for why there is an opioid crisis in this country, as it is not only easy to acquire these medications, it is also hard to be free of them once you take them. I was only lightly impacted. I can only imagine if someone takes these for a longer period, addiction is likely, where dependency can turn into a matter of survival. As much as it masks pain for good purposes, an addicting substance can quickly become the very thing that enslaves you. My limited experience was an eye-opener to this dark reality.

Addiction, of course, is only one condition from which the healing process can be like going through hell. Patients battling cancers of various types know that chemotherapy or radiation are no picnic, either. Clients undergoing psychotherapy to address terrible traumas or mental disorders in their lives often fear the treatment as much as the demons within them. Healing is very hard because the physical or emotional pain levels rise to paralyzing heights before they are mercifully relieved, if they ever are. Illnesses and conditions of all types can require hellish forms of treatment, leaving the patient wondering if the remedy is worse than the disease. Healing can be hell. For many people, it may be easier to remain unwell.

in particular, this holds true when the burden of disease, disorders, or addictions include a social cost. As we know, isolation is frequently imposed in clinical settings to avoid medical complications. However, in the harsh reality of daily life, shame and shunning often occur with stigmatized conditions, such as addiction, AIDS, or mental disorders. Social isolation is a consequence that medical professionals frequently won't identify or address.

Not uncommon, those who are not well do not want people getting too close to them or, on the other hand, they may wonder if anyone remembers them when they are out of sight and, often, out of mind. If it occurs for any length of time, it can be traumatic in and of itself. Isolation can magnify pain, as in most people it leads to a depressed state of mind.

Even when a person is restored to good health, it may not mitigate the effects that isolation brings. Relationships can appear strained when they aren't. Awkwardness abounds, even between people who once were close. The "elephant in the room" is evident, but not comfortably acknowledged; sometimes what is said isn't helpful or empathetic. Social stigma or depression can be as much a factor as the illness itself in preventing a person from experiencing wellness.

For broken people, of which there are many, social isolation and stigma can result in feelings of resignation and resentment, often directed toward those who try to help, but who may not understand. In many situations, an offer to help can be perceived as patronizing, even if it is intended to be kind and considerate, especially if a sufferer feels judged by their current state. The natural reaction may be anger, which comes across as very intimidating, if not frightening, to those who want to help. Volatile reactions can isolate victims even more as caretakers lose empathy with each eruption.

The social impact of suffering isn't anything new. It was known about long before the biomedical aspects of illness and disease. In the ancient world, where there was no medical science or appreciation of the biological basis of health, all conditions were viewed as due to something broken in an individual's life. In every instance of mental, physical, or spiritual disorder recorded in the Bible, the original audience and writers would have had

very little knowledge of what we would view as “medical” treatment. Folk medicine was certainly peddled, as were spices and oils as remedies, but most people simply suffered with pain.

This is important to grasp because in the ancient world, there wasn't a notion of being “cured” of a mental or physical condition as we would think of it today; instead, victims are “healed,” meaning they are restored to their life and community—their social standing was changed and isolation was over. Healing as it was, was largely spiritual and symbolic (even psychosomatic at times), certainly more than being metabolic or organic. Healing, in effect, was “symbolic” deliverance. I know this sounds strange, but we should recognize that in ancient and more primitive conditions, pain and illness were universal—normal suffering that everyone lived with. By our standards of physical health alone, everyone would be considered “not well.” The major concern in wellness was, however, will their relationship with God and others be restored?

Why is this? because any form of human suffering was viewed as a consequence of moral sin or impurity, i.e., God's earthly judgment upon the person. So, the forgiveness of sins healed what was a broken relationship with God and the social isolation or stigma of shame that resulted from it; that is largely what healing meant in the ancient world—that is what made a person well. So, when Jesus healed a person, he freed them from their sin and they became well. Yes, Christians believe Jesus possessed miraculous powers to alter the laws of nature to cure people, but if that is the premise we make, then we miss how healing was much more about the person being restored to the community from their isolating condition. As I said, there was no shortage of folk healers who claimed the ability to improve physical ailments—that wasn't something new or unusual. The controversy that

Jesus stirred up repeatedly wasn't his power to heal, it was the audacity to claim that he had the authority to forgive on God's behalf the sins of each victim to make them well. Within the social and religious structures of society, Jesus was restoring isolated and "impure" people to the community.

In our specific text for today, it wasn't a matter of physical health, but mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing in question. Demon possession in the ancient world was about the spirits controlling a person, where a nonhuman being tormented them. This belief was based on a worldview that is far different than ours today. In the words of one New Testament scholar:

In the worldview of the first-century Mediterranean area, causality was primarily personal. It took a person, human or nonhuman, to effect change... Things beyond human control, such as the weather, earthquakes, disease, and fertility, were believed to be controlled by nonhuman persons who operated in a cosmic social hierarchy. Each level in the hierarchy could control the ones below:

1. "Our" God, the Most High God
2. "Other" Gods or sons of God or archangels
3. Lower nonhuman persons: angels, spirits, demons
4. Humankind [which had subclasses of dominance]
5. Creatures lower than humankind.

Demons (Greek) or unclean spirits (Semitic) were thus personified forces that had the power to control human behavior. A person accused of demon possession was a person whose behavior... was deviant... who represented a threat. Possessed persons were excluded from the community. Freeing a person from demons, therefore, implied not only exorcising the demon but restoring that person to a meaningful place in the community as well. ¹

For Mark, the point of this story was to illustrate that the spirits on the third level of the hierarchy of powers were identifying Jesus as possessing the power of one on the second level (i.e., the "other" gods, sons of God, and archangels) whose authority was greater than the human-oppressing demons. At the outset of Mark's story of Jesus, this was his purpose—to

¹ Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Fortress, 1992, pp. 79-80.

express the spiritual power and authority of Jesus as one equal to other gods, sons of God, and archangels—power superior to angels and demons, but inferior to the Most High God—something his disciples would come to recognize in time and the leaders of Jerusalem would deny. This, in effect, was the biblical worldview that we inherit.

Obviously, we don't share this perspective upon the world or cosmos, so we must employ some caution in how we interpret Jesus' role and his miracles. There isn't a one-to-one correlation between the first and 21st century worldviews. Yes, there are parallels with how mental disorders result in social consequences very similar to the first century. Those with psychiatric disorders or emotional trauma often do behave as if they're out of control; hence, they are perceived as a threat to society, stigmatized, and often isolated from the mainstream. The impact of isolation often magnifies the symptoms with additional anti-social behaviors, such as unprovoked rage, eccentric outbursts, cursing, intimidating actions, sometimes substance abuse, and the like—behaviors that appear like demon possession.

Interestingly, at the same time, this story reflects the reaction people who are not well often have toward those who intervene and attempt to change their situation. "What have you to do with us...have you come to destroy us?" The fear and anger are genuine. Disturbed and depressed people often fear change—not that they don't want to be healed, but because of what it will take out of them—they who have settled into their daily darkness and desperate routine of their lives. Being reintroduced into the normal mainstream of everyday life is strangely threatening, because it has represented for so long where they don't belong and are not welcome.

Healing can be hell. “How can I possibly be well? Do I even want to be healed?”

There are no quick cures and there are no easy ways to be restored back into human relationships or community. I wonder if this is why Jesus repeatedly demonstrated the power of deliverance in his world through healing, because those who suffered needed to perceive something other than the power of death and rejection already so familiar to them. Likewise, those in the mainstream needed to realize there are no expendable people in the realm of God. No one is condemned to live in hell; no one is rejected from a redemptive community, especially when their condition is not of their own making.

I dare say, although it is 2000 years old, this redemption from social isolation would even be a “new teaching” for us today. The stigma and shame of many conditions remain evident in our time. Isolation still harms many lives suffering physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual brokenness. To heal a person begins, as Jesus did, in paying attention to a sufferer—seeing them as a person, not as a problem—empathizing and embracing their misery and bearing the sorrow of their condition. It’s not a momentary concern or commitment. Look beyond their hostile reaction if there is one and, like Jesus, forgive them if they resist a caring overture. We must do the hard work of expressing Christ-like love. To usher a suffering soul through hell to a place of restoration takes time, resources, persistence, patience, and most of all, a steady flow of empathy and merciful love. No one finds their way back to health without encountering more pain. So, walk each step of the way with them until they can recognize that they are, indeed, well.

There's so much more that could and needs to be said about this. However, I will close at this point with a Prayer of Faith (written anonymously) that, in my view, seems to grasp what it's like when healing is hell:

We trust that beyond absence there is a presence,
That beyond the pain there can be healing,
That beyond the brokenness there can be wholeness,
That beyond the anger there may be peace,
That beyond the hurting there may be forgiveness,
That beyond the silence there may be the word,
That beyond the word there may be understanding,
That through understanding there is love.

For this is the way heaven looks upon us all, when we are well and especially when we are not.

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