

THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF ILLNESS

Mark 2: 1-12

1) When I was studying for the ministry in Montreal, one of the things we did is visit a prison. We were hosted by the chaplain there, and along with a visit of the prison itself we spent some time worshipping with prisoners. After worship we took some time to talk with those who were part of the worshipping community. I had a sit down time with Jimmy.

Jimmy was maybe 30 years old. He had been in and out of prison for petty theft and other small crimes. Some of the more serious charges were related to violent interchanges he'd had with those trying to stop him from stealing, causing them physical injury. He had also gotten involved with some drugs and like most every prisoner there had some type of substance abuse issue.

Sharing our reflections with the chaplain later on, it became clear that there were some similar issues and experiences with the 30 or so inmates we met. There was childhood abuse and neglect, the trauma of violence, physical and in many cases sexual too. Parents or guardians often had their own issues with drugs, alcohol and mental health challenges which made parenting children a problem. As they grew up, these men had also faced many challenges in school and society, and even with some good people in the system trying to help here and there, they had fallen through many cracks in the system leading to bad results.

Jimmy, like others, also had anger management problems. Those in prison often externalize their anger and hurt through violence. Jimmy was working toward rehabilitation. He knew that in order to avoid getting himself back into prison when he got out, he had to get clean and stay clean. He had to find positive and supportive environments. He would try to make amends to his partner and child when he got out, hoping they would give him another chance. He also wanted to continue to grow his faith and prayer life because he knew how much it was helping him deal with all the anger he felt inside at how life's misfortunes had robbed him and robbed others because of his behaviour. I still think of Jimmy sometimes and wonder, prayerfully, whatever became of him...

2) Well, studies have shown that people like Jimmy have a far lower chance of succeeding in life and a far higher chance of failing. Why? Whether people are marginalized because of poverty, poor parenting and few social supports, or because they are part of marginalized communities who have been traumatized or neglected by the system because they are black, indigenous or people of colour, or because of their gender expression or sexuality which leads to social isolation, self-loathing, guilt and conflict in the home leading to homelessness... Whatever the reason people are segregated, experience violence, neglect, poverty and abuse... and however

they are made to internalize this trauma... it is also true that people become sicker much more often – physically, mentally and spiritually. Illness and poverty, lower life expectancy and intergenerational trauma, depression and anger issues along with many serious and chronic health conditions... this all goes together. Our bodies often express what is tormenting our minds and hearts. We're completely interconnected. Of course, illness is illness and the misfortune of illness can happen to the happiest of us, but there are also solid trends and connections that no one can deny.

3) Well, all this leads directly to our gospel lesson this morning. Too often we read the healing stories of Jesus in isolation, as if they are stand alone stories and incidents involving specific people without any sense of the larger social realities people were living. If you consider any group of people who have suffered severe trauma over generations and how that trauma leads to all kinds of health problems – physical, mental and spiritual, you will better understand the people in and around Galilee Jesus the healer was engaging. These people were suffering major dislocation, having been pushed off their ancestral land, like Jesus' father Joseph whose ancestral land was in Bethlehem, but being landless, he was working as a carpenter up in Galilee or wherever he could get work, just enough to feed his family. Poverty, brutalizing violence by Rome and Herod and the authorities of their own people extracting every heavier taxes for their own opulent lifestyles, building and military campaigns... this was their reality. The Hebrews were a colonized people, just like indigenous peoples and just like any people colonized or enslaved by large empires or nations wanting more land and wealth for a privileged culture and elite with the power.

So what does the experience of living off your land, dislocated from your traditional way of life, living hand to mouth, everyone worked to the bone with little energy to enjoy and rejoice, going to synagogue and the temple only to be told your are bad and what you are suffering is the result of your own failure before God... Guilt, shame, grinding poverty, constant humiliation, being beaten down... what happens to people over time and over generations you think?

Life breaks down and health breaks down... There are far greater incidents of domestic violence, neighbour with neighbour violence and mistrust as everyone is out for themselves. There is far greater illness and auto-immune conditions from skin ailments, seizures, mental illness leading to hallucinations, outbursts and reactions, debilitating depression, blindness and other conditions often from infections left untreated... This is Jesus' world as it is the world of many in our world today and the experience of many of the most impoverished and neglected communities and reserves here in Canada...

So what can Jesus do? How can he bring any measure of healing? And what can his healing open up as possibility for the communities and villages where healing may happen? How does he work with the little seeds of faith in these communities and among people, faith that something

better is possible, that God can work with the little bits of life in us to raise up new life and fight off a system – demonic and human - set up to keep people enslaved to the imperial machine?

The story in our gospel lesson is a wonderful example of what healing hope looks like in Jesus' world and what healing hope he can resurrect among a broken people. There is a paralysed man. Why is he paralysed? What suffering has he experienced? Was he the victim of violence and injury, malnutrition, a minor condition that only got worse with neglect, poverty and hard labour with no disability allowance to take a break to heal? We don't know.

But what does Jesus see? He sees four friends of the man. Whatever else is going on in their lives, these friends gather together and are totally committed to helping out their paralysed friend. And so, they figure out a way to get him to Jesus. There's no pathway into the house where Jesus is. They are desperate and they are determined. Elsewhere in the gospel Jesus will teach that any faith that has a chance of getting results has to be persistent, stubborn and determined. All those who come to Jesus or are brought to Jesus exude such faith. Jesus recognizes it and honours it. He can work with such faith. This is the kind of faith that will help people regroup and change their awful and seemingly hopeless situation.

The friends climb the roof of the house with their friend on a cot. They tear through the roof and carefully lower the man down, right in front of Jesus. Is Jesus upset at what has just happened to the roof of his family home? It's going to take days and maybe weeks to repair it, and there will be cost too. But is Jesus upset? No. He is astonished at the faith and commitment of these friends and their love for their friend. "When Jesus saw **their faith**," were told...

But there's something more. Jesus also addresses the paralytic. Physical illness and shame often go together. Why do people not heal, even if there is medical intervention? How does despair and depression, grief, anger, bitterness and so much else contribute to blocking better health outcomes? This man, like everyone there, was part of a system where they were put down and kept down by condemnation, judgement, guilt and shame. That's how you control a population: physical violence, humiliation and shame.

And the only way to get some relief is a way set up by the religious authorities themselves. They control forgiveness. Come to the temple, give your money, do your bit of sacrifice and if the authorized priests are satisfied, you get your forgiveness. But just enough to keep you going. You'll never make up for all your sins and inadequacies. You'll always come up short. You'll always be one step ahead of eternal judgement, if we say you are. So, what does Jesus do? Jesus sees his friends' faith and then declares to the man with authority: "Son, your sins are forgiven." Wow!

The authorities are upset... of course they are! And they are more upset with Jesus declaring the man forgiven than with the healing itself. Why? Because they know what power forgiveness can have in that world. Imagine if everyone came together to help each other and everyone was liberated from the guilt, shame and condemnation that kept them enslaved to the system. Revolution would ensue. Jesus was a great threat by declaring forgiveness for free and encouraging this mutual support of friends and neighbours for one another. Wow. Where would this all lead?

4) Well, here we are today, 2000 years later, called to be the hands, feet, voice and heart of Jesus for each other and in our world. What inspiration and what revelation is given us in this story? We must inspire faith and work with faith. Faith is about commitment, commitment to other people and commitment to our mother earth, commitment to work together for a better future, to support one another especially when any of us is struggling in some way. Healing happens when love comes alive in concrete giving, sharing and supporting.

Also, we are here to love, openly and freely. Sometimes love requires us to say sorry to create an opening. Sometimes love requires us to forgive and let go, seeking reconciliation where possible or living in peace when the door to reconciliation is not open. Sometimes love requires us to take chances and risks with people, even when we don't have all the information that would make us comfortable. Sometimes love requires us to give it time and patience and wait on people and situations without giving up. And sometimes love requires lots of courage and grace because the way ahead is anything but clear and the way to loving in a certain situation is really hard.

Through the Holy Spirit we are called to live out the Jesus' way. Jesus is our foundation, but he needs our hands, feet, voice and our heart to continue his ministry and mission. He needs our love, our faith and our commitment and we need to grow these dimensions of our being more and more to work through ever greater challenges that come our way. We are called to be healers even as we need healing ourselves. We are called to support one another even as we need the support of one another. We are called to become whole even as we are still on the journey. Like the four friends, may we find our way with others even as we must discover our own empowerment with God above us, beside us and within us. "I say to you: stand up!" says Jesus to the man. Jesus says that to us here and now as well. May we look around, see the love that surrounds us and the empowerment of forgiveness that can liberate us from any inner shame or spiritual disability that keeps us down. May we find the medicine of love through others and through the faith that may be watered, nourished and grown in us. Amen.