

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021B

What's the main topic of the Bible? Pose this question, and you'll get a variety of answers: sin, salvation, love, law, morality, or meaning. Few will suggest that the Bible is mostly about healing and wholeness. Yet some scripture scholars and not a few Christian doctors have made that argument persuasively. Human wholeness, as understood in the Judeo-Christian story, involves the complete package of body, mind, spirit, and relationship. It is fundamentally rooted in our relationship with God. That's why suffering and death are directly linked to original sin. Once our relationship with God was thrown into jeopardy through sin, our very survival was at risk.

In Bible talk, well-being is linked to righteousness, health and strength intrinsically related to obedience. Fidelity to God leads to fertility and longevity, and faithlessness inevitably to barrenness, disease, and death. The word **shalom**, which occurs some 250 times in the Hebrew Bible and translated in shorthand as "peace," really means something more like **completeness**. When shalom is operative, human beings enjoy physical, mental, spiritual, and individual wellness, as well as social prosperity and national peace.

As one scholar suggests, the motto of the book of Leviticus—a compendium of laws—boils down to this: "Be

holy because I your God am holy.” When we live in God’s image, things go well for us. When we refuse to do so, we open ourselves to a host of maladies and moral deformities.

Job is the first person in scripture to contest the idea that wholeness is strictly the result of holiness. He is the quintessential upright man, yet calamity, loss, and sickness come to him all the same. What did Job do to merit the loss of children, home, property, and wealth; not to mention marital harmony and healthy flesh? What’s more, Job finds his relationship to the greater community in peril, as most avoid him and only a few friends stop by to urge him to repent. The goading point is that Job didn’t do anything to deserve his fate. Even God, who makes a grand cameo appearance at the end of the story, accuses Job of nothing more than petty thinking. The I-Thou relationship between Job and his Maker is obviously quite healthy. So why does Job suffer?

The question is open-ended. But the fact that it’s even asked in the Bible consecrates the quest to find the meaning behind our suffering. One clue is in God’s impatience with Job’s provincial perspective. Maybe we should adopt a cosmic viewpoint: If it’s not Job’s sin that causes his suffering, maybe it’s the world’s sin to which he falls victim. Personal holiness cannot save us from the damage caused by communal and intergenerational moral

failings. The crucifixion of Jesus is the ultimate argument against the idea that innocence provides us with a buffer against pain. Even those in right relationship with God can and will suffer and die.

The basic Christian platform is that Jesus saves. To believe anything less, to demote Jesus to wisdom figure, hero, or nice guy, is to negate the whole Christian story. The word used for saving power in Greek literally means “safe and sound.” It’s often translated as deliverance. What do Christians insist they are delivered from? Four elements appear in the gospels from which we regularly need to be saved: danger, disease, the condemnation of God, and sin. Paul’s writings, however, narrow the theological scope of salvation to **deliverance** from sin and its normally unavoidable wage, death. This is the Pauline gospel offered “free of charge” in the same manner Paul receives it.

If that’s “all” salvation has to offer, deliverance from sin and death is still nothing to sneeze at. It’s a darn sight better than anything the world has to give. When we find ourselves in Job’s shoes—or his bare feet, more likely—we can trust that though we must certainly die, death has no victory over us. Jesus has redefined biblical health as sharing in the abundant, eternal life of God. This fullness of life bursts at the seams of our present existence so that it cannot be contained in this lifetime. When we accept the

invitation to divine life, we find the measure tamped down and spilling over—in a word, unstoppable.

In **The Bible and Healing**, John Wilkinson notes: “The heart of the problem is the problem of the human heart.” Everyone looks for Jesus around Capernaum because each has his demon, her fever, their private suffering that needs a healing touch. And Jesus is not averse to exercising his healing powers and including them in the definition of gospel. As he says, “Let us go to the nearby villages that I may preach to them also.” Whereupon he preaches and drives out demons as if the one activity naturally implies the other.

Modern Christians tend to downplay the demonic passages because we’re not much for devils these days, but casting out demons was all in a day’s work for Jesus because the experience of being held bound by the power of evil was common. I suspect it’s just as common today—though we use words like addiction, poverty, depression, shame, and low self-esteem to describe our sense of virtual paralysis.

Don’t you want to be healed? I do. I could make a list of things in me that just aren’t right. I’m fettered by past memories and mistakes, and some big doozy poor choices I’ve made along the way. I’ve had my share of “problems of the heart” that impede my ability to love freely. We go to Confession and the sacrament of

Anointing to offer up some of these items to the holy healing touch. But if we want the deep healing to take place, we have to grasp the hand of Jesus and allow him to lift us up, as he did Peter's mother-in-law. To Jesus, it's all in a day's work, but to us, it could mean the fullness of life.

Deacon Gerry