

A Personal Touch

Have you ever noticed how many scenes in the gospels are filled with sick people? Jesus was constantly surrounded by the sick. Wherever he went, the sick were brought to him. In Sunday's gospel (September 5) he is in the district of the Decapolis, east of Israel (Mk. 7:31-37). It is pagan territory, yet ***“people brought to him a deaf man with a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him”*** (Mk. 7:32).

Jesus' attitude toward the sick teaches us how to deal with the afflicted around us. So many people find themselves face-to-face with broken humanity. It is easy to get weary or numb. It's easy to be worn down. I am thinking of families who care for a child with a disability, a spouse taking care of a husband or wife declining mentally or physically, workers in nursing homes, medical personnel who have been bombarded with Covid-19 patients in a seemingly endless battle, first responders helping the survivors of a hurricane, or soldiers in a situation like Afghanistan.

When you are constantly caring for broken humanity, it is easy to get weary, or even to become numb to the poor and sick. In the worst case, we become blind to their pain, and selfishly focus on ourselves.

Jesus' attitude toward the sick teaches us how to deal with human frailty. Let's focus not on the cure of sick people but on Jesus' attitude toward the sick. What can we learn from his attitude? First, notice the personal attention Jesus gave to the deaf man. He took him off by himself away from the crowd for a personal encounter. His ministry was not about being popular by demonstrating his power to heal in front of everyone, but of caring deeply for a human person.

He put his finger into the man's ears and touched his tongue. His manner with the sick was intimate. Maybe one reason that Jesus took this man off by himself was so that he did not worry about the crowd looking at him in his brokenness. The privacy allowed him to be alone and at ease with Jesus, like a patient before a doctor, or a penitent before a priest.

First, Jesus served others with personal undivided attention. He concentrated on the human person in front of him, not on the crowd, nor on the hundreds of other sick people waiting to be cured. Second, he knew that his mission was to be incarnated, to take on human flesh. He was sent to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim the Gospel that God cares for the poor and afflicted.

Jesus served with a personal touch and a sense of mission. His mission was to live the incarnation, or to be with broken humanity, to be close to the sick and caress them with tenderness.

I imagine that Jesus experienced fatigue because that kind of attention is taxing. He was tired at the end of the day, but not worn out. A person who has a mission gets tired, but a person without a sense of mission gets exhausted. He or she loses a sense that God has sent them and is with them. That God is working in a broken world.

Today some people feel exhausted, so they have quit caring. This is the basic definition of sloth; acedia means “not to care.” The demon of sloth or acedia is called the noonday devil because it strikes in the heat of the day when we are worn down from the heat of the sun and the dreariness of life. Sloth manifests itself by weariness, sadness, not caring, or a lack of purpose. In fact, not caring and not having a purpose (or mission) go hand-in-hand. The person does not care because he or she has lost a sense that God cares, that God is with us, that God sends us to care for the suffering.

A disciple who has succumbed to sloth has lost sight of the paschal mystery of Jesus' suffering and death that leads to the resurrection. That disciple has forgotten that in the passion of Christ God did his greatest work. The same is true for you and me if we have the attitude of Christ.

As I thought of Jesus' attitude – his personal touch for each individual and his sense of mission to proclaim that God cares for the poor, I was reminded of a movie about Mother Teresa. The movie is called *Mother Teresa: In the Name of God's Poor*. There is a scene where she is meeting with an Indian civil official and asking for permission to use an abandoned Hindu temple to care for the dying.

The man challenged her and said, "What is your plan? Look at all the people lying in the streets. Do you really think that you can change things?" She replied, "This is my plan. We will take one person and pick him up and bring him into the building and wash him and care for him. Then we will go out and get another person and care for him, then another person. We will care for one person at a time. That is my plan."

What was behind her attitude? What was her inner conviction? One day at the train station, she had a conversion moment. While she was surrounded by the destitute, a man looked at her and said, "I thirst." Later she realized that it was Christ speaking to her. His cry for help was the same as the plea of Jesus from the cross, "I thirst." In the chapel for the Missionaries of Charities, the words "I thirst" are often in large letters on the wall near the crucifix.

Mother Teresa believed in the incarnation, that Jesus is present in the hungry and thirsty, the naked and the sick, the stranger and the imprisoned. She was struck by the verse, "***Whatever you did to the least of my brothers [and sisters], you did to me***" (Mt. 25:40). She believed in the incarnation of Jesus in the poor. Like Jesus, she attended to people with a personal touch for each individual and she lived his mission to proclaim that God cares for the poor.

St. Theresa had a mission which made her tired, but never exhausted. You could never say about her, "She just didn't care." She did not succumb to the noonday demon of acedia, not caring. Why? She believed that God cares. That suffering has a purpose. That we are on a paschal journey. That God does his greatest work in the midst of suffering if only we persevere in prayer and good works.

Today remember that God cares for you. The key to effective prayer is to come before God with a clear sense of God's love for us, his power to heal, and his desire to fill us with life. "***Jesus looked up to heaven and groaned***" (Mk. 7:34) when they brought him the deaf man with a speech impediment. He groaned in his desire to heal him. He has the same desire for every single person.

The Eucharist is always an encounter with Jesus who makes all things well. Ask him to heal your spiritual, emotional, or physical illness. Then he asks you and me to bring his personal care to the poor and sick. Ask for the grace of perseverance and hope in this mission.