

When Linda asked us to give a homily about healing, in the context of our work in Lesotho, she also assigned us a text to read. It's a book called 'Compassion as a Subversive Activity' – a catchy title, but not really descriptive of what's inside. The book is written by a doctor from Boston, a specialist in children's brain disorders. In his book he has taken accounts of medical miracles performed by Jesus from the Gospel of Mark, the largest store of miraculous cures in the Bible. He has contrasted them with stories of children and families in his own practice. At first glance, the contrast couldn't be sharper. In the stories of Jesus it takes only a word, a gesture, a touch to instantly bring about healing. The blind man sees again, the deaf and dumb man has his speech and hearing back, the leper is clean, the epileptic is calm. In one case, a woman only has to touch His robe, without His even being aware of it, to be cured of her illness. Compare this with the world of pediatric neurology, where the word 'cure' is rarely used and progress is measured in inches. Who, in that situation, wouldn't want the power to cure effortlessly with a simple touch of the hand? All of us in health care can only daydream about the ability to having such a healing power.

Yet, there is more common ground between these two worlds than you might suppose. The author points out that what Jesus is doing is more than relieving these people of their signs & symptoms. These people lived in a time and a society much less likely to accommodate people with disabilities than our own. Those who couldn't see or communicate or walk would have been relegated to a marginal place in their villages. He is, by giving them back their health, restoring them to a useful and accepted place in their community. And even though the author can't wave his hand and cure his young patients, he too, through medication and therapy, is helping them to begin to play a part in their world. And this acceptance in their world, he points out, is what 'healing' is all about. It isn't always successful; sometimes his young patients worsen or die. Then the 'healing' takes the part of reconciling the family to accepting what has happened in their midst. They too need to be healed in order to make sense of their world and to continue to live in it.

My work in Africa this past winter was in a Canadian-sponsored AIDS Clinic in Lesotho, called the Tsepong Clinic or 'Clinic of Hope'. Some of you might have seen a CBC documentary about the clinic on the programme, 'The Nature of Things', several years ago. The clinic has been in place for about five years and has led the way in providing modern treatment for the Basotho people. Note that we say 'treatment' and not 'cure'. The concept of 'cure' is not currently up for discussion with HIV infection or AIDS; when you have the Human Immunodeficiency Virus in your body, it's there for as long as you live. And though in the western world HIV infection has become somewhat of a manageable chronic disease, like diabetes, in Africa it is still a frightening and life-threatening illness. So how could this small clinic be realistically called the 'Clinic of Hope'?

Well, as we've seen, healing doesn't have to be of the sudden, miraculous kind. Healing focuses on getting people away from being an 'invalid' –interesting word, isn't it? It literally means 'not valid' – to return to an active role in their life. And with

the help of Anti-RetroViral drugs, or ARV's, there was now a way to make this happen. These drugs can subdue the virus so that people who felt weak and tired could have their normal vitality return. This meant that they could be mothers to their children or care for their elderly parents or be wage-earners again. For the children with HIV infection, it meant that they might not die before they had a chance to grow up and have an education. Of course, we also gave them the means and the information to keep them from spreading the virus to others. But the emphasis of our work was to improve their health and well-being, in order to make their life as normal as possible.

In this book, the author makes the point that healing is not limited to the circle of patient, family and health care team. For patients to be restored to their place in society, society itself must play a role. There has to be acceptance of and accommodation for people whose abilities are different from the norm. And so this doctor spends much of his time advocating for his young patients in their schools, to keep them from being shoved to the sidelines of education. He makes the case that every child is the 'face of God' and should be accepted on that basis, and not whether they can learn as quickly or run and play as well as the others. This is a bold concept that we still struggle with as a society, as Joanne who has been a Special Ed teacher, knows better than I. In my work at the Tsepong Clinic, this aspect meant dealing with the stigma of HIV infection in African society. Patients, when they started at the clinic, would make every effort to conceal this part of their life from their friends and relatives. No one ever seemed to die of AIDS; families would always give out the cause of death as something else.

This stigma and the denial of the disease could take a more immediate and palpable form. When patients came to the clinic too ill from their disease or its complications to return home, they would be admitted to the Motebang Hospital, of which we were a subsidiary part. I was told that in the early days of the clinic that the hospital nurses would refuse to care for these patients, not even to give them their medication. This meant that family members would have to stay and look after them. Of course, this was not only social prejudice on their part of the nurses, but was based on the fear of contracting the virus themselves. Lest we become smug about this, remember that the same aversion to HIV patients occurred in our own hospitals at one time. But time has passed and progress has been made. Education of the nurses as to how the disease is transmitted and what precautions can be taken has made a big difference. When I was there, our patients admitted to hospital were no longer segregated and were treated matter-of-factly by the nurses and others just like everyone else. This is how society around us has to play an essential role in the process of healing.

Reading this book and applying it to my own medical career, both in Canada and abroad, has led me to look at healing in a different way. The relief of an illness is, of course, important in itself, but also as it restores the individual to the person he or

she was, or perhaps has the potential to be. And it is contingent on society accepting that person as a worthy member, no matter what their capacities. Perhaps that is what the author of the Gospel of Mark wanted us to know.