

Lame excuse: Isaiah 43:18-25; Mark 2:1-12

by [Barbara Cawthorne Crafton](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

People in Jesus' time thought that illness arose from people's sins. They thought this happened in a fairly immediate cause-and-effect relationship. And they had thought so for a long time. Many of the psalms, like Psalm 41, allude to the idea: Heal me, for I have sinned against you.

Today we are more apt to think that illness afflicts us in a more random way. He "caught" a cold, we say, or he "developed" a tumor. Jesus, in the story of his healing of the paralytic, seems to offer his hearers room for both approaches: "Your sins are forgiven," he tells the stricken man, and a collective murmur of shock and disbelief goes up from the crowd at his presumption in declaring forgiveness of sins: Who does this guy think he is? To clear things up, Jesus commands the paralytic to take up his bed and walk. The man gets up, picks up his pallet and goes on home. Whether or not his malady arose from sin, the man is healed.

See, says God to Isaiah, I am doing a new thing. You thought you knew how the world works, but you know only so much. There are surprises in store for all of you, so stay tuned.

Many of the diseases that roamed the earth in ancient times, devastating all who crossed their paths, have now been tamed. Having conquered many of them, it seems that we will conquer all of them. Perhaps now we will have a world without illness, we think to ourselves, and then a new one comes along to terrify us. Still we have confidence: a cure is possible for anything if we just put enough research and enough money into finding it. And so we walk and bike and run for the cure. We give to the cancer society, the heart fund, the diabetes foundation. We no longer give up on the sick, no longer isolate them, content to believe that they have brought their illness upon themselves. That's ancient history.

Or is it? We usually don't give up on the sick; we usually don't think they've brought it on themselves. But consider the history of the AIDS epidemic in this country, and

how it was veiled in secrecy and shame for ten years before we faced it as a public-health problem. Think of the euphemisms still employed in the newspaper obituaries when someone has died of HIV-related illness. And consider the devastation that secrecy continues to cause in Africa and Asia. For reasons of politics and public relations, government after government has refused to admit that AIDS was a problem in its country until it became almost insurmountable. The numbers are staggering: 40 percent of the adult populations of some African nations may be infected. Half the children may become orphans in the next five years, with no healthy adults left to care for them. Denial has proved fatal.

Or consider mental illnesses. The New Testament people assumed they were caused by demon possession. We don't think so today. Or don't we? We still cloak these illnesses in shame and secrecy. When psychiatric illness grips its victims in behavior that isolates them and frightens those around them, we compound the misery by treating it like a failure of nerve or a character flaw. People are ashamed to admit they or someone they love has it, afraid someone will find out they're in therapy or that they take antidepressants—as if their illness were really a sin. And so they don't seek treatment, those who love them cannot understand their symptoms, and victims suffer for decades. Research on cures for mental illness lags far behind that for other illnesses in urgency and funding. There are no telethons for schizophrenia, although 2.2 million adults in America are afflicted, compared with the 250,000 who live with muscular dystrophy, another incurable disease. But the Jerry Lewis Telethon raised \$58,000,000 for muscular dystrophy in 2001 alone.

Jesus couldn't have healed the paralytic if the man's friends hadn't been part of the project. He wouldn't have known about him. They had to work to get in to see Jesus: the door was blocked with onlookers, and they had to come in through the roof. We think of ourselves, of our caution, of our careful attitude toward our own longing for healing: we don't get our hopes up. What did they know that we don't know? What did they know that made them think this would work, that Jesus could do something new in this man's life? They must have been pretty sure, or they wouldn't have stuck their necks out like that.

Or pretty desperate.

Maybe. But I think it was this: they loved their friend a lot. They hated what his illness and pain was doing to him. Love was the force that propelled them forward into such extreme action. It made them brave—foolish, some of the onlookers might

have said, but brave.

The Son of God is not yes and no, St. Paul says. In him it has always been yes. We may not think God sends heart disease or cancer to people because of their sins. We no longer charge God with the “no” in human history. But we do look to God for the “yes.” We do know that God sends patient caregivers, dedicated researchers and physicians, devoted family and friends to walk with the ill through their painful journey, whether it be a journey toward cure or a journey toward a fuller life. Such people are sent from God whether they know it or not. Anyone who is part of the “yes”—part of the healing, the comfort, the building-up—is the servant of God.