

Love goes to work: Miracles in the midst of dying

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Healing is about more than a well-functioning body. As important as it is, an individual, functioning body is only the visible tip of the much deeper phenomenon of health. The full realization of health encompasses bodies, souls, and the relationships that join us to communities and places. In order to appreciate these far-reaching dimensions of health, we must attend to the heart—the animating core of our lives.

When our hearts are wounded or sick, we're tempted to turn inward and away from others. We build protective walls to keep the pain away. We become dis-eased, ill-at-ease, and unable to be with others in a harmonious way. We find ourselves fragmented and alone. When we're sick, the relationships that would normally inspire and nurture us are broken, and the avenues of mutual care and delight are cut off.

To be healthy is to be able to move freely, sympathetically, and shamelessly among others. We experience the conviviality that is possible in a shared life. Put another way, when we're healthy, the relationships that join us to communities and neighborhoods are life-giving and strong. We receive blessings with gratitude and generously offer help to others.

Healing is the reverse of sickness: it opens us to others, to the world, and to life's possibilities. In the healing process our hearts are cleansed of fear and guilt, and redirected so that we can participate in the flow of love that joins us to each other,

to our places, and to God. This is why, from a Christian point of view, healing and forgiveness are intimately connected to each other. In Christian parlance, the name for the wholeness and joy of a healed life is *salvation*.

Forgiveness is the action that liberates us from the pain and guilt of our pasts so that we can make a fresh start at living. Without forgiveness a body can function just fine, but it will often function in the wrong sorts of ways. With forgiveness, a body—even if injured or incapacitated—can move in ways that bring joy and peace into the world. The difference between sickness and health depends on the strength of the love that's at work. As the power of love increases, so does the capacity to live.

It wasn't until I met Mark that I began to understand this.

Several years ago Mark Eddy and his family became part of the small college community in Georgetown, Kentucky, where I was working. My family invited them over for dinner, and we discovered that we shared interests. Mark played bluegrass music, and I hoped he would teach me to play the banjo. I even dreamed that we might someday form a band. But it was not to be. That first fall, Mark's nagging cough got worse, and medical tests showed that he was in the advanced stages of cancer. His doctor told him to tell his family the awful news. Mark said that gathering his children around his bed to tell them he was going to die was the worst moment of his life.

Before joining our community of work and church, Mark had been a clinical therapist, but the work depressed him. He didn't like himself or the people he served. Mark admitted he had become difficult to be around. But teaching college students was different. Mark felt he had finally found work that was life-giving and fulfilling. He had come to feel more alive than he had in years.

Our church community realized that Mark's family would need a lot of help. Being new to our area, they had not had the time to establish the networks of friendship and support that would help them face major practical matters. How would his wife, Lisa, keep her new job as a middle school teacher while attending to Mark's needs? How would their sons Paul and Matt make the transitions into their new school while dealing with a father who was dying? Should their eldest child, Karen, come home from college? Who would do the shopping, driving, cooking, and cleaning? Who would help when family members were exhausted?

So many people made offers of help. Some brought food. Some brought gift cards so that the family could buy what they needed. Some drove the boys to and from school activities, while others drove Mark to his visits to his doctor. Some sat with Mark so he would not have to sit alone. People who barely knew the Eddys adopted them as family members and committed themselves to sharing the family's worry and fear, but also to sharing hope. It was beautiful to see a community of love develop around this family, but it was also very hard. Seeing his family grieve, staying with the family through ups and downs, and watching a man die—it was a lot to bear.

One Sunday morning not long before his death, Mark stood up in front of our congregation at Faith Baptist Church and read from a journal entry written several years before. Though physically well at that time, he had been living in a lonely hell.

Or maybe all of this—the anxiety, the emptiness, the vague illnesses—are all due to a common underlying factor: I dislike almost everything about my life, this town, this house, this job. They bore and disgust me. I have no friends and no group of people other than my family that I feel a part of, valued by, where I fit in. I dread getting up. If I am ever to be happy it will have to begin to happen soon. But I don't feel any closer to that goal than I was ten years ago.

For ten years Mark had been functioning physically but was minimally alive because he was suffering from a sick heart. He was withdrawn, angry, sad, and anxious. He didn't like people and didn't want them to like him. He was angry at God for not helping him and had become an atheist.

Mark's healing began when a psychiatrist helped him understand his depression. Antidepressants enabled him to feel some love and happiness, but he was still angry and anxious. He started to pray again. Gradually he began to see that God was calling him to restart his life as a college teacher. He realized that he needed to turn outward to help others rather than remain locked within his own pain.

The next time Mark stood before our congregation, he had an oxygen tank tucked under one arm. "I feel better than I have felt in years," he said. "I can't thank God enough for that." How could this be? The cancer was not gone. Yet Mark testified to a miracle:

When it became known that I was sick, I found myself surrounded by the light of love from people who hardly knew me. My family was flooded with prayers, food,

cards, and the assurance that we were not alone. . . . It was as though there were a thousand arms of love reaching out to us. I knew it was the presence of God. I felt that I'd been overtaken by the kingdom of God and allowed briefly to look inside to experience just for a moment the love and joy of Christ's kingdom.

Mark believed himself to be forgiven and newly empowered by God's love made real in the kindnesses of ordinary people. The darkness and the pain were gone. Love made it possible for him to be a father and a spouse, cherished by his family, and to be a valued friend who, though visibly dying, could encourage and give hope to people who had only recently come to know him. Mark could not have imagined that an ugly cancer would make his life and his world beautiful again.

One night while Mark was sleeping, Lisa looked over at him. She wondered how she would manage without him. How would she handle watching him die? Mark woke up, rolled over to her, and said, "I've never felt such joy and peace in all my life." They talked about how God was making it possible for them to approach this terrible time with joy and peace, and how Mark was the beneficiary of a healing of heart that freed him to see those around him as gifts from God. Mark said that God had cleansed his soul so that his life could be animated by Christ's peace and joy and gentleness.

Mark ended his testimony to us with these words: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of darkness—on them light has shined" (Isa. 9:2). He wanted us to know that loneliness and darkness are not where God wants any of us to be. "This is what God has done for me," he said. "A light has blazed in my darkness. The healing light of Christ has blazed forth."

The Gospels reveal that the birth of Jesus was an occasion of joy because people knew that he would save them from the sin and corrupting love that damages the world. Jesus is the Savior because he brings healing to the whole world. He repairs relationships characterized by violence and injustice and guilt, and guides people "into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79).

Jesus is called the great physician because he understands how diseases develop and why relationships unravel. He diagnoses and cleanses sick hearts, then sets people free to live a new life. Moreover, he models and invites people to share in forms of ministry that nurture, heal, and reconcile relationships. If we look to Jesus and participate in the forms of life that he makes possible, we learn the nature of

illness and discover possible and practical paths toward healing.

When John the Baptist asked Jesus who he was, Jesus responded that because of him “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt. 11:5). And when Jesus was getting ready to send his disciples out on their own, he said, “Proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons” (10:7-8). No wonder people came in droves. The New Testament Gospels are full of stories that show Jesus demonstrating this love. Jesus is proclaimed to be the Savior of the world not because he plucks people out of this world as if to relocate them in some ethereal, disembodied heaven, but because he enables them to experience life abundantly here and now.

His healing presence is visible in many moments of his ministry. While it’s expressed in the recovery of material bodies, Jesus’ healing extends to the cleansing of hearts, the freeing of souls, and the restoration of relationships. Above all we see him respecting and restoring the dignity of individuals so they can be participating members of the communities in which they live. He sees what their lives can be if their suffering is healed. People are “saved” because they are given the fresh opportunity to experience the wholeness of life.

People came from many directions to see Jesus because he represented a compassionate and empowering response to life’s suffering. “All in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them” (Luke 6:19). When Jesus laid his hands on a crippled, bent-over woman who had not been able to stand up straight for 18 years, she immediately stood up straight. When he met a naked, demon-possessed man, he commanded the demons to depart, and the man returned to his right mind. When a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for 12 years touched the fringe of Jesus’ clothes, her bleeding stopped.

It is right to speak of these events as *miracles*. People were surprised and astounded by Jesus’ ability to transform sickness and death into new life. We should be clear, however, that a miracle is not simply an interruption or an abrogation of the laws of nature. Our bodies get sick and die because their physiology demands it. Many people believe that if sickness and death are overcome at a word or touch from Jesus, then Jesus has reversed or canceled something that otherwise would have happened.

But Jesus' miracles are not interruptions. They're focal moments in which Jesus shows us creatures as they are meant to be: physically healthy, well fed, of right mind, and in right relationship with each other. Miracles are God making right what has gone wrong. They are not interruptions but acts of *liberation* that allow creatures to move into the lives that God desires for them.

Jesus shows that the world's brutality and needless suffering are not natural at all. Illness, hunger, derangement, injustice, and hostility—these are all reflections of creation gone off course. Miracles are God's no to the forces that undermine and wound creatures, and God's yes to the possibilities that creatures can realize if they are no longer shackled by the evil that stifles, distorts, and demeans life.

How is Jesus able to do this?

Christianity is founded upon the stupendous claim that Jesus of Nazareth embodies the divine love that creates and nurtures all life. Jesus is God's eternal love focused in one person and made active in the world. Jesus is our window into what human life can be. To be touched by Jesus is to be touched by the power that creates and sustains the universe. When Jesus enters into our pain and wounds, working to transform them from within, he is God living our questions, frustrations, and struggles and creating new life. He is God embracing the torn fabric of our lives, mending and making beautiful the tapestry of creation. He is the embodied expression of the divine love that creates and heals the whole world.

To be a follower of Jesus is to learn to live in the flow of this love and experience the joys of a healthy life. It leads us followers to form communities called the body of Christ that can be sources of hope and encouragement for others as they move from sickness to health.

This article is adapted from Norman Wirzba's book Way of Love: Recovering the Heart of Christianity (HarperOne). Used with permission of the publisher.