

God cares about health (Luke 13:10-17)

For Luke, sickness is the devil's work, which Jesus came to combat.

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Although the Gospels often elaborate Jesus' oral teaching, in this week's reading his action makes a bigger impression.

Jesus heals a woman's spinal problem. Obviously, spinal affliction, like other physical problems, can have a range of causes, but in this case Jesus addresses the spiritual dimension behind it. Building on decades of collected empirical research, modern biomedicine offers an increasingly high rate of cures. At the same time, health professionals also often recognize emotional and spiritual components in healing. A majority of the world's cultures also believe in active spiritual as well as physical forces at work.

Luke does not associate every sickness with the presence of a demon. But from his perspective, sickness is ultimately the devil's sort of work, which Jesus came to combat (Acts 10:38). The contrast in this passage is sharp: Satan afflicts people, whereas Jesus cares for people's wellness. That is, ill health is one of this world's evils that we should work against. By restricting anyone's access to health care, some by-the-book religious observers risk siding more with Satan's opposition to this woman's health than with Jesus's concern for it.

Experts on the law debated whether healing was allowed on the Sabbath if one's life was not at stake. Before the temple's destruction in 70, many synagogue leaders

probably followed the stricter approach that prohibited healing on the Sabbath. Yet Jesus applies no medicine; he merely lays hands on the woman and declares her healed. Because God does the work, even the strictest synagogue leader should not have argued against this healing. As Jesus notes, his critics would untie their animal on the Sabbath to water it; how much more should this daughter of Abraham be released on God's special day?

Some Christians today follow their traditions so strictly that they care more about detailed rules than they care about human need. Some rules are important, but we risk taking pride in our strict observance—or even in strictly avoiding being like such strict people—instead of remembering that we all need God's grace.

Although through much of history Christians have taken the lead in building hospitals, some Christians have emphasized concern only for the "soul." But the latter approach owes more to Plato than it does to the Bible. Jesus' ministry repeatedly shows that God cares about our physical health. Those who work to improve people's health, whether by research or treatment or prayer, care about and labor for a cause dear to God's heart.

Various indices underline the inequities in global health care. For example, some European countries with universal access to health care average three maternal deaths per 100,000 births; the US averages 17.4. Afghanistan recently has had a rate of 110.6 maternal deaths per 100,000 births. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for about two-thirds of maternal deaths in the world.

Such disparities may reflect the priorities of resource-rich countries (and sometimes of corrupt governments). But Jesus' model invites different values. The issues raised in Luke 13 remain alive today.