

The Lectionary makers cut out a few verses (Luke 14:1-6) in the reading assigned for today. Maybe they thought the story was long enough without the healing of the man with dropsy, or that the healing story was a distraction from the main event at the Pharisee's house. No harm, perhaps, in leaving out another confrontation about healing on the Sabbath, is it lawful or not. As it happened though, this time around in the dance with the Lectionary, I was struck by the relationship between the two parts of this passage that, at first, seem to fit together rather oddly

By tradition, Luke was believed to have been a physician, though there is nothing in the gospel or the rest of the New Testament that says so. As David Schlafer has pointed out in his teaching and preaching, the Gospel according to Luke comes back again and again to healing, and to hearing. As David has phrased it, Luke is concerned about "How is healing heard? How is hearing healed?"

Physician or not, Luke intends for us (listeners) to hear the two parts of the story around the dinner in the Pharisee's house together, and to hold them side by side. When we do, what do we see, and hear?

Dropsy is a condition that more familiar today as "edema," swelling caused by water retention in the tissues, as with congestive heart failure, when the heart muscle not able to pump hard or efficiently enough. So the man was swollen, he was puffy, obviously not well.

He came to Jesus for help. For the lawyers and Pharisees, this presented a dilemma, and Jesus knew it. So he asked them, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" They were silent. By now, they may have been reluctant to tangle with Jesus. Or maybe they've been mulling over what they've heard about his healing on the sabbath; maybe they're not so sure any more. Is it lawful? Or isn't it? For Jesus, though, there was no dilemma. It was simple and obvious: he took the sick man, healed him, and sent him on his way. No fuss, no big deal.

Healing the physical ailment was straightforward. Healing the soul sickness he observed among the dinner guests, not so simple, is harder to get at. It takes some awareness of being sick and desire to be healed when souls are sick. No one at the party was lining up, on this sabbath or any other day, to say, "*Help me, Jesus. There is something deeply wrong in my life, in my world view, my assumptions about myself and other people. There is something deeply amiss in my soul.*"

How, then, to provoke the crisis that usually comes naturally with serious *physical* illness? Sometimes Jesus just came right out with it, as he had not long before, at the house of another Pharisee. That host was amazed that Jesus did not wash before dinner. Jesus told him, "you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. . . . Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the

seat of honor in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it.” (11:39, 43-44)

That was pretty graphic. *You may be clean outside, but you’re a real mess on the inside.* Harsh; hard to hear. Not likely to evoke a positive response, *Thanks for setting me straight, Jesus. You are right! I think I’ll repent and change my way of life; I’ll do it today!* It’s hard not to get defensive in response to a broad-side attack.

Here, now, the same issue has surfaced again, with the dinner guests jockeying for the place of honor at the table, to confirm that he, each one, is more important, more worthy than everyone else. They are so caught up in themselves they can’t see the contradiction between what they are doing and their intention, as Pharisees, to lead holy lives pleasing to God, in every detail of life.

This time Jesus took a different tack, not a broadside, but a parable that might give these guests just enough room to realize for themselves how ridiculous they were.

Last week’s gospel ended with the familiar saying of Jesus, “Indeed, some are first who will be last, and some are last who will be first.” (13:30) After church, someone told me that, when she was a little girl, her teacher said that to the class when they were all pushing and shoving to be first in line. You know what happened: the next time they lined up, of course, all of them were scrambling to be *last* in line. It all takes on the air of slapstick comedy. And if the guests at that dinner party could see that—if we could see that in our own lives—they might just see how ridiculous, how irrelevant, and contrary to leading a holy life pleasing to God so many of our concerns including status, recognition and advantage really are.

I wonder sometimes *how* Jesus said the things he said, what tone of voice, what inflections. He may have been exasperated with those guests, but I don’t think he was trying to mock them. He was hoping to open them to a new way of seeing themselves. He was trying to open them to healing, the healing of their souls.

And because he was a good, if difficult, guest, he did not leave out his host, who also seems to have been operating within the norms of his social group, inviting his friends, relatives, and the useful and important people to dinner, business associates, people who could help him stay in a leadership position among the Pharisees.

How could anybody ever know to do otherwise, though, without the kind of subversive intervention Jesus was making here? How could anybody know to do otherwise, without the subversive intervention of the gospel?

Dropsy,—swelling, puffiness of body, shortness of breath are easy to recognize. We know we need a cure. But puffed up ego, pride, ambition and greed that make our neighbors invisible to us—the poor, crippled, lame and blind whom Jesus would have us

invite to our luncheons, dinners and banquets—are much harder to see in ourselves. Especially when the culture around us enables and encourages the soul sickness.

We ourselves are saturated with the message that the most important thing is our freedom to consume, to be comfortable and safe, with no regard to the effect our lifestyle has on our neighbors. We see and hear messages that actually encourage us to be greedy, to believe that we always need more, and still more, and that we deserve it. We, and still more so our children, have come to believe that we must be constantly entertained, when we are not busy, so that we are rarely if ever alone with ourselves long enough to know who we really are, and what our real place in the world is, as children of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

At the same time, it is almost impossible not to be aware of the extreme poverty and suffering of our neighbors in the poorest nations of the world. As we see and hear more and more stories and statistics—about the growing gap between the world's and the nation's wealthiest and poorest, and the effects of poverty, including millions of deaths every year due to poverty-related conditions—it is harder and harder not to be conscious of the sickness these conditions create in our souls, and the soul of our nation. We are painfully aware, not because we are so self-absorbed, but because we are not.

We know, and we do what we can to make a difference, with our time, our presence, and our money. But we also know that all our giving will not put an end to extreme poverty, not even if we were to give away everything we have. We might be tempted to despair, as a result, or to turn off, turn away from seeing and hearing, and from the problem of our neighbors' suffering.

But if we are living in a time of painfully heightened awareness, we are living also in a time of great hope. Serious economists and world leaders tell us that we can end extreme poverty in the poorest nations of the world, if the wealthy nations will work together with the poorest, on sustainable economic development. There is great hope for this to happen in our lifetime through the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2000 to reduce extreme poverty and its effects by half, by 2015.

In a few weeks, on Sunday morning, we will focus on this important world-wide movement in our worship and education. Our own Church supports these Millennium Goals: The General Convention of the Episcopal Church, our Presiding Bishop, our diocese, and our own parish. They are about justice and care for the poorest and most vulnerable of our neighbors. They are political, but not partisan, not of one party or the other, not conservative or liberal. They are a way we can be part of healing both the physical hunger and suffering of our neighbors, and the healing of the souls of us all. They are a way we can be part of opening a place at the table for all of God's children to be welcomed and fed, whoever they are, as we have been welcomed and fed at the Lord's table.