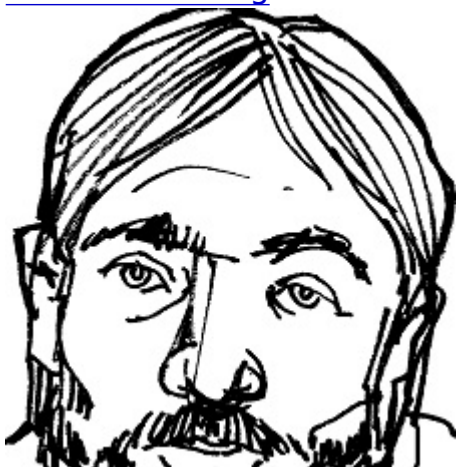


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by Pat Marrin

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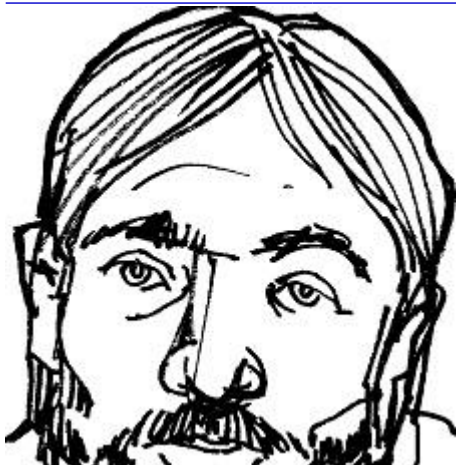
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“Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?” (Luke 14:3).

*Phil 1”1-11; Luke 14:1-6*

The Evangelist Luke has been called a physician because of the detailed descriptions of illnesses healed by Jesus in his Gospel. The Gospels generally give us a window into diseases and treatments common in Jesus’ time. Folk medicine prevailed over science, while causes of maladies focused as much on moral and spiritual agents as physical diagnosis. Poor hygiene, diet, water quality, lack of dental, skin and eye care led to debilitating conditions, premature aging and shorter life spans.

In today’s Gospel, Luke adds legal and ritual prejudice to a lack of care for those suffering from illness. A man with dropsy, or fluid swelling in his limbs, is used as a prop to test whether Jesus will break the sabbath rule by healing him at a dinner. Like other stories involving a man with a withered hand and a woman bent over double for 18 years, we witness the callous disregard for the dignity of the victims by Jesus’ enemies. The man disfigured by dropsy is positioned right in front of Jesus to force him into self-incrimination if he shows compassion on him.

Jesus cites the same law being used against him to confound his critics, reminding them that Moses allowed people to care for their animals on the sabbath. The trappers are trapped in their own ignorance and mean-spirited motives. Jesus is vindicated from the charge that he was a lawbreaker, an accusation that survived in the diatribes thrown at the early church as Luke was composing his Gospel.

We have advanced in science and healthcare by leaps and bounds, but social prejudice and moralizing against certain conditions continues. COVID-19 has revealed shocking inequities in available care for minorities. Jesus had a healing touch that was drawn to suffering and a willingness to expose himself to every kind of social and physical disease, whether among lepers or sinners.

Compassion begins with the capacity to give ourselves away, to risk our well-being and security when moved by the suffering of a neighbor, as the Samaritan on the road did, and unlike the rich man who stepped over Lazarus on his doorstep to be on time for the next banquet. Jesus did not discriminate to select the worthy sick or the grateful victim, and he ignored those who used religion and law to include some and exclude others in need. It is always lawful to cure on the sabbath, and on every other day, if the one law you serve is the law of love. This is the first commandment, and to obey it is to fulfill the entire law.

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