

In 2007, the Grammy-award-winning singer Mary Chapin Carpenter suffered a pulmonary embolism. She was admitted to an emergency room after experiencing terrible chest pain. A scan revealed blood clots in her lungs. People told her that she should feel lucky because a pulmonary embolism can be fatal and here she was, getting the necessary medical care. But instead of feeling lucky, she fell into a depression.

In her essay, "The Learning Curve of Gratitude," on National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition," Carpenter said,

"Everything I had been looking forward to came to a screeching halt. I had to cancel my upcoming tour. I had to let my musicians and crewmembers go. I felt that I had let everyone down. But there was nothing to do but get out of the hospital, go home and get well. I tried hard to see my unexpected time off as a gift, but I would open a novel and couldn't concentrate. I would turn on the radio, then shut it off. Familiar clouds gathered above my head, and I couldn't make them go away with a pill or a movie or a walk. This unexpected time was becoming a curse, filling me with anxiety, fear and self-loathing. All of the ingredients of the darkness that is depression."

Carpenter's experience of having this medical situation can show us so well the fact that the suffering of illness is not simply physical. Physical diseases or illnesses are often accompanied by the pain of isolation and alienation. When we are ill, we can feel cut off from our community, cut off from our plans for the future, cut off from hope. Physical illness is often accompanied by "all of the ingredients of the darkness that is depression."

In our gospel lesson for today, we hear the story of the healing of the ten lepers. In Jesus' day lepers were quite literally cut off from the community because of their physical illness. Leprosy was a name given to a wide range of skin diseases that were greater than the illness we know today as Hansen's disease. It was a condition that was met with fear and ignorance. The leper was to be removed from sight and isolated from all communal and religious contact. In Leviticus, the law says, "The leper who has the disease shall wear torn cloths and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, 'unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp." Disease and isolation are multiple illnesses that go hand in hand.

While Jesus is traveling by a village on the way to Jerusalem, the group of ten lepers draws near, but they are also careful not to get too close. They drew near out of their need; they keep their distance because of their disease. Their illness creates a barrier between them and others, between themselves and the community. It's interesting in today's gospel that in the presence of Jesus, the lepers do not cry out "Unclean, unclean." Rather, they cry out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us."

Out of the pain of their disease they say, "Jesus, have mercy on us." Out of the depths of their isolation they say, "Master, have mercy on us."

And he does. He tells them to go and show themselves to the priest as the law requires when someone is healed. And as they go, they are made clean. Restored to health, they will also be restored to the community. No more wearing torn cloths, tattered garments on a tattered body. No more long hair hanging over their blotched and blemished faces. No more yelling out "Unclean, unclean" from covered lips. No more dwelling alone outside the camp.

But a funny thing happens on the way to see the priests. One of them turns back and praises God. He throws himself at Jesus' feet and thanks him. And the surprise ending of this story is that the leper who praises God and gives thanks for his healing is a Samaritan. He was not only physically ill, but he was a social reject, an outcast, an undesirable foreigner. The one isolated not only by illness, but also by his culture and beliefs, turns back and gives praise to God.

It is in his actions today we can find our story; a story that is not just about physical healing. It is a story about the healing of all those things that keep us separated from each other and exiled from God. All of our pain and isolation is healed in the presence of Christ. Out of our pain, out of our loneliness, out of our despair we, too, can cry out across the abyss, "Lord, have mercy on us." In the presence of Christ, in the nearness of the Lord, we are healed, made whole, restored to our community and reconciled to God. It may not be the cure we are hoping for, but the healing is deep and real with God's help.

Mary Chapin Carpenter found healing for the darkness of her depression at the grocery store. She says:

"One morning, the young man who rang up my groceries and asked me if I wanted paper or plastic also told me to enjoy the rest of my day. I looked at him and I knew he meant it. It stopped me in my tracks. I went out and I sat in my car and cried. What I want, more than ever, is to appreciate that I have this day, and tomorrow and hopefully days beyond that. I am experiencing the learning curve of gratitude. I don't want to say 'have a nice day' like a robot. I don't want to get mad at the elderly driver in front of me. I don't want to go crazy when my Internet access is messed up. I don't want to be jealous of someone else's success. You could say that this litany of sins indicates that I don't want to be human. The learning curve of gratitude, however, is showing me exactly how human I am."

The learning curve of gratitude. It's a lovely phrase. It's something we learn along the way. Here's how Carpenter will begin:

"Tonight I will cook dinner, tell [those I need to] how much I love [them], curl up with the dogs, watch the sun go down over the mountains and climb into bed. I will think

about how uncomplicated it all is. I will wonder at how it took me my entire life to appreciate just one day."

Joe Pagano, an Episcopal priest, says that "Our earthly lives are a journey, somewhere between Samaria and Galilee, between illness and health, between exile and return. We are all traveling along the way. Because of the frailty of our bodies we will all succumb to illness at some point in our lives. Because of the devices and desires of the human heart, we will all suffer from the fear and distrust that separates us from our neighbors and from God. But rather than remaining within the darkness of our despair and keeping ourselves at a great distance from others, our Lord bids us draw near, even as he draws near. He awaits our cry for mercy and he responds by making us whole, by restoring us to life with others and by reconciling us with God. And he keeps scanning the horizon, looking for the other people whom he has already healed, who will realize one day that they too are already forgiven, that they too are already being made whole, who will return to him, and give thanks and praise to God."

Return, give thanks to God. After all, it's Thanksgiving Week. No time is more perfect than now.

Amen.

with thanks to the sermon of the Rev. Dr. J Pagano which has been adapted here