

GOD'S JUSTICE AND HEALING

God's vision for the world is one where everyone is healthy. It is for easy us to think otherwise. Suffering is universal and is happening all around us every day. The world, our bodies and our spirits are often places of deep and profound brokenness and affliction. It is easy for our imaginations to be captivated by a variety of false beliefs – that affliction is God's will for or punishment of the world, that people are responsible for their own afflictions, and that we can't do anything about the presence of affliction, so why should we try. But if we look closely at Scripture, it becomes clear that affliction of all forms is not God's punishment or God's will. It is not immutable, nor invulnerable. We know this because our God is Jehovah Rapha – God who heals.

The Bible shows us in the Old Testament that God did not regard affliction with complacency and apathy. God is concerned with healing afflictions – be they spiritual, physical, emotional, social or structural – and restoring people to wholeness. God heals infirmity, comforts the despondent, defends the cause of the helpless, and liberates the oppressed. His actions in the world affirm that affliction is present, but that God is not silent nor is healing absent. God acts in the world in real ways to mediate affliction and conveys His vision for a world without suffering: In the Kingdom of God, no infant will die in its first days of life, old men will live out their years, and weeping and crying will be heard no more.

Jesus also challenges affliction as a fact of life. His very first acts of public ministry were acts of healing. There is rarely an instance in the New Testament where Jesus preaches the Gospel without also healing the afflicted. By doing so, Jesus not only proclaimed that he was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, but he also proclaimed the Kingdom of God. He created, in small ways, a world where people no longer said "I am sick." Jesus changed people's lives by restoring them and changed the way they related to others by bringing them into full participation in their community.

Jesus' healing also challenged the systems that controlled access to healing. The synagogue rulers were trying to stay in control of who, when, where and how people were healed, meaning many were left out of the healing process. Jesus was not concerned with rule keeping or maintaining social boundaries and healed "outside the system." He touched the untouchable, healed on the Sabbath and extended healing to the stranger. His acts of healing exposed the limits of the system in place and freed those who have been bound by both their afflictions *and* the system that restricted their access to healing. By healing those on the margins outside of the appropriate systems, Jesus forced relationships to be realigned and principles to be reexamined. Healing, even an individual's healing, is always a radical social act: It always makes clear there is a divide between the world's beliefs' about healing and God's vision for healing in the world.

If affliction is not God's will or punishment, if it's not immutable or invulnerable, then how is it perpetuated? Simple answer: It's us. Affliction, in all its many forms, is both a consequence and a symptom of our lack of Shalom or justice and wholeness. Our afflictions are symptoms of a larger problem: We are out of right relationship with God and one another. When viewed in this regard, we have a part to play both in the perpetuation of affliction in the world and in the healing of affliction in the world. Psalm 41 says that for those who consider the helpless – the weak and the sick – God sustains them and heals *their* infirmity. The relationship between our infirmity and the infirmity of others is clear: Affliction is relational and so is healing.

We model our response to affliction after God's merciful and just response to our affliction. We do so by hearing the desire of the afflicted, encouraging them and listening to their cries, and defending their cause. Similarly, as co-laborers with Christ we also model our response after his commission to his disciples to proclaim the Gospel and heal the sick, knowing that healing was both an individual act of mercy and a social act of justice. When we encounter those who are afflicted, we must fight the impulse to ask, "What did *you* do to cause this," but instead we must seize the opportunity for the healing works of God to be displayed through us. When healing happens, we must fight the impulse to ask, "Why were *they* healed," but instead we must seize an opportunity for worship and celebration. We never earn healing. It is not an affirmation of our faith. Being healed opens the door and is an invitation for each of us, every day to profess or affirm our faith and to live it more fully.

Healing, like conversion, is a long journey and we are all traveling together every day. We are called to be healers and in order to claim that identity in Christ, we must believe that healing, both for ourselves and for others, is always possible. Still, healing will not always look as we expect, nor will it always come in the ways we hope. What we think we may need to make us or others whole or what we may pray for ourselves or others may not really be what is needed for Shalom. As much as we are called to be confident, we are more so called to be humble, knowing that it is through God's will and power, not our will and power, that healing happens. By being confident that healing is possible and humble that we are not in control, we are free to give and receive healing in many unexpected ways to and from many unexpected sources.