

Jesus cures a woman on the sabbath and immediately the leader of the synagogue is indignant. He speaks neither to Jesus nor to the woman who was cured, but rather he addresses those who are present to discourage them from seeking healing on the sabbath.

This past weekend, I received a call on Saturday afternoon from the hospital to visit the sick. I and other priests truly enjoy being able to visit the sick to offer anointing and to offer words of encouragement to help a person who is ill. On the weekends, we may not be as free as we would like. When the hospital called me, I was in the middle of a funeral and could not call back until a few hours later. I asked the nurse if there was someone else they might call and soon learned that I was freer to visit than the other pastors on the list. So, I arranged to visit on Sunday, the sabbath. I felt bad that it took me 21 hours to respond after first being called. But the nurse who had originally asked for a priest understood that I came as soon as I could. So did the patient.

Jesus tells us “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). To help bring Jesus to the forefront of the hospital visit, I read a little bit of scripture from Saint Matthew: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light” (11:28-30). So often, when we really need help, we don’t call upon God. He is always aware of our needs and I imagine a little disappointed when we go in the wrong direction rather than seeking his help.

The woman who came to the synagogue never utters a word about what troubles her. Jesus sees and understands. The root of her physical problems is a spiritual one that has troubled her for 18 years. “When Jesus saw her, he called to her and said, ‘Woman, you are set free of your infirmity.’ He laid his hands on her, and she at once stood up straight and glorified God” (Lk 13:12-13). She is thankful and no doubt her words of praise for Jesus easily stir up jealousy or envy in the synagogue leader.

During my Sunday hospital visit, I was made to feel welcome. The nurse pulled a chair out for me and the patient gave me their full attention. This isn’t always the case. People are often in pain and it is the rare hospital patient who beams with a smile. I would love to have the healing touch of Jesus to set everyone free of infirmities, but I don’t. The patient and I talked for a while. I listened attentively and the person was very thankful for the time I was able to give them. I offered to pray, and the person helped me by letting me know what was most important to them. After the prayer, I left with a sense that I had been helpful for meeting the person where they were at. The nurse was also happy that I had come. Unlike the Gospel story where the leader is upset with Jesus and takes his anger out on the crowd, both the nurse and I recognized that to help in the healing of a patient, the best medical care can always benefit from spiritual care to accompany it.

The reason I share the story is that during the pandemic, many people are isolated at home. One need not be in the hospital, to call for help. A person may have good reasons to avoid making contact with the general public and they may even have good reasons for not calling upon a priest to come to them. If you know of someone in need, whether they have suffered for 18 years or 18 hours, you might be the right person to offer some spiritual support either in person or by phone. Offer to read a short passage from scripture, listen attentively, give a few words of wisdom if the Lord inspires you and then pray for the person. We may need to leave the miracles to Jesus, but the time and attention we can give to another person allows us to be concerned caregivers and that really makes a difference.