

Medicine of the Person

68th International Meeting

July 27th-30th 2016

GB - PILGRIM HALL

Bible study 1

Johanna GOLDBACH (D)

28/07/2016

“What do you want me to do for you?”

[Luke 18, 35-43 (NIV and GNB)]

In Luke 18, verses 35 to 43, we find a Bible story that exemplifies our topic this year. It is the healing of a blind man. I'll read the text again in the Zurich translation of 2007. Then I'll present Jesus as the doctor, the blind man as the patient and the crowd's share in the responsibility; I'll end with 3 contemporary examples to illustrate my presentation.

Jesus heals a blind beggar (Luke 18, 35-43, GNB)

35 *As Jesus was coming near Jericho, there was a blind man sitting by the road, begging.*

36 *When he heard the crowd passing by, he asked, “What is this?”*

37 *“Jesus of Nazareth is passing by”, they told him.*

38 *He cried out: “Jesus! Son of David! Take pity on me!”*

39 *The people in front scolded him and told him to be quiet. But he shouted even more loudly: “Son of David! Take pity on me!”*

40 *So Jesus stopped and ordered the blind man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him:*

41 *“What do you want me to do for you?” - “Sir,” he answered, “I want to see again.”*

42 *Jesus said to him: “Then see! Your faith has made you well.”*

43 *At once he was able to see, and he followed Jesus, giving thanks to God. When the crowd saw it, they all praised God.*

Jesus as the doctor

Luke, the author of the gospel, is himself a doctor and knows that a good relationship between a doctor, a patient and others around the sick person is essential in the recovery process. In this part of Jericho Jesus is known to many people as an itinerant preacher and healer. His good reputation goes ahead of him. His disciples surround him and the others walking with him, yet in spite of the babble of voices he hears the cry for help from one man who calls him Son of David. Does he want to flatter Jesus with his persistent shouting? Does he want money or finally some attention? Jesus stops and orders the man to be brought to him. When they have got close to each other, Jesus turns to him and poses the key question directly: “What do you want me to do for you?”

By means of this apparently unnecessary question, Jesus forces the blind man to admit to his need and darkness and to express his deepest longing. Full of hope, he asks to see again. Jesus recognizes his blind trust, his faith, and fulfills his great desire: “Then see! Your faith has made you well.” He heals him in every respect; he heals the whole person – the blind man regains his health in body and soul.

The blind man as the patient

He is sitting begging by the side of the road, helpless and dependent on others. He has probably accepted his loneliness and the darkness in his life, but he has not given himself up. Then he hears the noise of a group of people walking by. He enquires what is happening and hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing through. He has already heard of the Son of David, the one who will bring salvation to Israel, and his unusual deeds. When the others threaten him because of his disruptive cries he calls out even louder: "Son of David! Take pity on me." He doesn't allow himself to be intimidated, but fights determinedly for this unique opportunity to get well again. And – miraculously – his cry is heard and people do lead him to Jesus. Suddenly he becomes aware of Jesus near him and hears the question posed to him, and him alone: "What do you want me to do for you?"

He blurts out his one great desire: "Sir, I want to see again." He is confident that the Son of David can do this; he has no doubts, no restraint, and no hesitation. This confidence allows Jesus to heal the whole person – both, his eyes and his inner being: Full of joy, gratefulness and curiosity the healed man stays close to Jesus. He follows him, wants to hear more from him and learn from him. In this way he finds his way back into a community – and starts praising God.

The crowd's share in the responsibility

At first the crowd of people following Jesus are more or less uninvolved. They are busy with their own affairs, and deaf and blind to the needs of one individual. He has to draw attention to himself by shouting out from afar. All the same, the people allow themselves to be disturbed and give him a brief reply, but they do not even consider taking him along with them. Instead they rebuke him, saying he should keep quiet. Jesus, however, hears his cry and reminds the crowd of their responsibility to help. Instead of acknowledging their hesitant assistance, Jesus pays the troublemaker his full attention. Unintentionally, the indifferent crowd becomes witnesses of how the personal encounter leads to healing. And "when the crowd saw it, they all praised God."

Who decides here about the treatment?

In this report the patient takes the initiative. In his lonely isolation he hears that Jesus is nearby and he becomes active. He shouts out a quick request in spite of the resistance of the others. In this way he secures himself a personal consultation. A confidential dialogue begins in which no-one makes decisions for the patient or influences him. He is taken seriously and encouraged to express his deepest need. We don't learn anything about the method of treatment except that there is a personal encounter. The pre-requisite is the patient's persistence, the recognition of his helplessness and his blind trust.

The main actor is Jesus. He has sensed the need of this suffering man and recognized his hope of a changed life. Noticing such things, taking them seriously and healing the whole person was and is Jesus's commission until today.

The man given this treatment joyfully decides to follow the one who gave him both attention and dignity. And those who initially refuse their share of the responsibility become eyewitnesses of the healing. Ultimately they cannot do anything but recognize God's power and praise him too.

Three examples from today

"Doctors in white" often see themselves as experts, as the only persons capable of understanding a situation and of taking correct decisions. Only rarely do they see themselves as instruments in the hand of God, who gives them gifts, understanding, money and opportunities. Not every diagnosis or course of treatment is feasible. Often the inner eye, the soul of a believer, shows a bright ray of hope and comfort on the horizon. He or she can see Jesus as the good doctor and the helper sent from God.

First example

Recently a **married couple I know** complained to me and said: What's the use of having the most modern medical equipment if the Ear-Nose and Throat specialist takes no time to explain the diagnosis of cancer in detail and its necessary treatment? He was peeved when they wanted to get a second opinion. The lady's longstanding gynecologist arranged a quick appointment for them. After that, they agreed to the operation. But before it took place the 74-year-old woman, who knows she is in the hand of God, asked her church to pray for her (as in James chapter 5). During the operation it became clear that no lymph nodes were affected. The couple took this to be the work of God, and as a result they refused the chemotherapy that was recommended. Post-operative checks have so far shown no further signs of tumor activity. The couple are convinced that God has confirmed their decision and they are trusting in his guidance for the future.

The dominant (or arrogant?) attitude of the professor lost him the chance of gaining their confidence. The couple felt they were neither taken seriously nor involved in the decision-making. Nevertheless, they were not angry with the "doctor in white". They felt safe in the hand of God and in their church fellowship, and therefore they entrusted themselves to the church elders. All in all, the woman is very grateful for her fulfilled life and prepared to meet God in eternity.

Second example

A personal experience: In 2001, when the HIV infection rate was extremely high in Botswana, I was treating a patient as an emergency during the weekend. While giving him a local anesthetic for the finger, the patient pulled his hand away and I pricked myself with the cannula. I was alarmed and – with the patient's consent – I tested him for HIV. He was positive. I informed my German colleague, hoping that she would advise me in my conflict. But over the phone she just said that I knew where the starter medicine was locked away. As the Post Exposure Prophylaxis had to start within two hours, which in the meantime had passed, I took the first dose.

In the evening my thoughts kept circling round what had happened. I reproached myself, prayed, read the Bible, wept and finally acknowledged that God had allowed the accident to happen. Yes, I had been pricked, but God could still prevent an HIV-infection – or allow it. As a member of the hospital staff, I had the privilege of getting prophylactic treatment (that would mean taking expensive medicine daily for 4 weeks; it could cause nausea and other side-effects, but it might prevent an infection). Who did I trust in more? God, who was unreservedly good to me – or his medicine? I came to the conclusion that if I should become HIV positive, then he would grant me courage, treatment, support and more. When I had taken the decision not to take any more tablets I calmed down and my inner peace returned. But in the next six weeks before the control test I fluctuated between wrangling with God, self-reproach and hope. The control test was negative. Praise the Lord!

Since then I understand what problems others go through in a similar situation. As a single person I took the right decision at that time. However, in a comparable situation my colleague, a man with a wife and three children, decided to take the prophylaxis. I wholeheartedly agreed with him.

Third example

Someone I know had difficult family problems. To top it all, a biopsy allegedly showed that she had cancer of the intestine. After the first dose of chemotherapy she felt so wretched that she refused to continue the treatment. Other people put pressure on me – **as her friend and a doctor** – to convince her to continue with it. – I listened carefully to what the woman said about her fears and the arguments she used. She had already spoken to two doctors, her family and the hospital chaplain and knew the consequences of refusing further treatment. But she preferred to have a few more months caring for her husband and the grandchildren rather than suffering terribly and being a burden to them and – maybe still die soon. I didn't dare to make her unsure about her decision. We prayed together and placed her future in God's hand.

With no further chemo, the woman recovered amazingly well. She became more open to the strains on the family, accepted help, began hiking again, started coming to our Bible study group and later joined a choir. After six months she went on a visit to Israel with me. When she later became the legal guardian of a granddaughter she said thoughtfully, "It's true that God still had a purpose for my life."

However, now after 10 years I am still not allowed to ask her anything about her health – she is being well looked after by her GP, she says. – Sometimes I wonder whether the difficulty she had making a decision was actually an unconscious call for help with the excessive demands of her family. It was not until she had made her decision that she became free to ask God to help her find a meaningful way how to spend the rest of her life.

The final question

Who are we to think that we can decide everything on our own or influence others in their decisions? Wasn't it God who made the first decision on our behalf when he allowed his Son to suffer death at Golgotha instead of us? Jesus agreed to God's plan and even obeyed the insight: "Not my will, but your will be done" (Luke 22, 42). Now God expects us to decide for him and to lead our lives close to him. Then we too could allow Jesus to ask us, "What do you want me to do for you?" And our answer could be, "Sir, I want to see again" - in every respect.

Let me close with words by Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

"I must know with certainty that
I am in the hand of God and not in man's hands.
Then everything will be easy, even the greatest privation. "