



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 My Father's Hands
(*Suffering*, pp. 76-83)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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My Father's Hands

Whether facing the twisting agony of arthritis or numb despair of leprosy, her father's response was the same: to take the hands of a person gently in his own, to become intimate both with their disease and with them. Renowned hand surgeon Paul Brand knew that we can use our hands to tell people in pain something about themselves: that they are not alone.

Prayer†

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 8:40-56

Reflection

The eighth chapter of Luke accents Jesus' astounding power – the windstorm and waves on the Sea of Galilee obey his rebuke (8:22-25) and a legion of demons flee from his voice, escaping their distraught human host to enter a herd of pigs (8:26-39). By sandwiching these miracles between a list of Jesus' prominent followers (8:1-3) and the twelve disciples being commissioned with "power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases" (9:1-2), Luke implies that Jesus' power is available to the disciples "to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal."

But Luke 8 is not all spiritual pyrotechnics. Two stories, always woven together in the synoptic gospels, reveal the personal side of Jesus' healing power – he *receives the touch* of the woman suffering with hemorrhages for twelve years and he *clasps the hand* of Jairus' dead twelve-year-old daughter. "It is a startling idea, as mysterious as magic: that God Himself drew on the power of physical closeness as a healing tool," notes Pauline Brand Nelson. "The implication, for those of us who call ourselves His servants, is that we too need to put ourselves within arm's length of the suffering around us. The same side of the fence, close enough to risk being affected. What else can it mean when we are instructed in the laying on of hands for healing?"

Brand recalls when her father, when the treatment of leprosy with drugs was in its infancy, carefully examined a man's leprosy-damaged hands and discovered the untapped muscular strength in them. "I wondered, recently, whether I ought to feel indignant that he decided to take a risk that indirectly exposed the rest of the family to the possibility of infection," she writes. "I found that I could not even begin to consider the question – partly because I was doing so from the position of the health I enjoy today, but more so because the man I knew simply could not have done anything else. There would have been no 'decision.' The act of examining that man's hands...was instinctive, a reflex made inevitable by the forces that shaped his character between his first encounter with leprosy as a child, and his second as a young surgeon – the forces of passionate curiosity, tenderness towards his fellow man, and a longing to serve God."



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Study Questions

1. "Thank God for pain!" Dr. Brand would exclaim. How did his study of leprosy confirm that a capacity for pain is good?
2. Do you agree that appropriate personal presence and physical touch is important to those who are suffering or grieving?
3. "It is true that we no longer put people with leprosy behind fences," says Nelson. "However...we have developed subtle and efficient ways to isolate ourselves from each other." How do we often distance and protect ourselves from people who are suffering?
4. In what ways, in Gillette's hymn "O God of Life, Your Healing Touch," should we be present to those who are suffering?

Departing Hymn: "O God of Life, Your Healing Touch"

O God of life, your healing touch
brings wholeness and salvation!
In you, this world you love so much
becomes a new creation.
Through Jesus Christ you blessed the poor,
unleashed your gifts of healing.
You gave new sight, new strength, new life—
to all, your love revealing.

O Christ, the loving healer still,
you gather us for mission
to serve your people who are ill,
whatever their condition.
You send us to the suffering
with medicine and caring;
now make our lives an offering
to those who are despairing.

Lord, by your Spirit, may we hear
the truth of others' stories.
May we respect their doubts and fears,
their hopes and dreams, their worries.
And when their ways are not our own,
Lord, give us understanding:
our faith cannot be fully grown
when we are too unbending.

How long, Lord, shall we serve the poor—
a week, a month, a season?
We ask the question, hoping for
a limit to our mission.
But open wide our hearts anew
and show us, as we're giving,
your life-long call to serving you
in daily, generous living.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, 2004
Suggested Tune: KETY

[†]*The Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

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Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 or 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To study the role of physical closeness in Jesus' healing ministry.
2. To consider how we distance and protect ourselves from people who are suffering.
3. To introduce the pioneering work of Dr. Paul Brand in the care of people with leprosy.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Download a PDF version of the departing hymn, "O God of Life, Your Healing Touch," from the Center's website, www.ChristianEthics.ws. Go to the Ethics Library, select "Search by Format," and "Hymns."

Begin with a Story

Pauline Brand Nelson recalls this event from the 1960s when her parents were on the medical staff of a leprosy hospital in Carville, Louisiana. "At [age] eight, having absorbed the lessons of my parents' research, I was carelessly confident of the fact that leprosy was not as destructive or contagious as people had once believed it to be.... [Yet] despite all the advances in drugs and surgical techniques, the fear of leprosy remained.... Around the grounds of the hospital, encircling the houses of staff and patients alike, ran a ten-foot-high chain-link fence....

"Outside the fence was a section of the River Road that almost nobody ever drove down, although now and then people drove slowly along its length, peering in curiously at the grounds of the hospital. On one such occasion I saw a couple looking at me with the intensity of birdwatchers glimpsing a rare species. They were trying to tell whether or not I was a patient. I felt the familiar anger boil up in me, and I walked to the fence holding my hands up in a gross caricature of the clawed position I had seen so often. Was this what they had come to see? Then I would give it to them! Their faces registering obvious horror, they sped away.

"At the time, I felt proud of myself, seeing my actions as evidence of courage in the face of the enemy. Now I recall the episode with shame, knowing that the evil lay not in the couple but in the fence itself, because it kept them at just the right distance to maintain their fear and ignorance. Like their forbears in medieval cities, they were able to observe the trials of their fellow man from a safe distance, but unable to respond in any meaningful way to that suffering" (*Suffering*, pp. 80-81).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read 8:40-56 from a modern translation. They should alternate, with one member reading 8:40-42 and later 8:49-56 (the healing of Jairus' daughter), and the second member reading 8:43-47 (the healing of the woman suffering from hemorrhages).

Reflection

The two stories of Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman are woven together in the synoptic gospels (cf. Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43). Jesus incurs ritual defilement by touching a woman with discharge of blood (Leviticus 15:25-30) and a dead body (Numbers 19:11-14). "Many kinds of defilement could scarcely be avoided" in daily life, Stephen Westerholm notes, and they did not violate biblical law "provided that steps were taken for purification" (see "Clean and Unclean," in Joel B. Green, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992], 125-132). Our fears of pain, disease, and death spring from different concerns than those in the Old Testament purity laws, but they still make it difficult for us to be personally present to those who are suffering.

Nelson reflects on the work of her father, Dr. Paul Brand, who pioneered hand surgery techniques for patients with leprosy. Misconceptions and fear still linger about leprosy, or Hansen's disease. For an introduction to the disease and its successful treatment, a description of the physical damage it causes to the eyes, hands, and feet, and information about its worldwide distribution, see the American Leprosy Missions website (www.leprosy.org).

Study Questions

1. Leprosy is a bacterial disease that damages the peripheral nerves and nerves in the skin, leading to loss of ability to feel pain. When a person cannot feel burns, cuts, or damaging pressures to the hands and feet, they do not respond quickly to normal injuries. "Indeed, one of my earliest memories from my Indian childhood was of learning that a young victim of leprosy had impressed his friends by putting a thorn all the way through his palm without flinching," Nelson writes. Ask members to consider what bodily damage they might suffer were they to lose normal pain response in their hands and feet.

By the way, other leprosy symptoms are cracked and dry skin due to loss of sweat and oil gland function and loss of strength or "clawing" in hands and feet due to nerve damage.

2. Encourage members to reflect on their experiences both as caregivers and as those who receive care. Have they experienced the power of physical closeness as a healing tool? Nelson suggests that we put ourselves on "the same side of the fence, close enough to risk being affected" by those who suffer, for "our presence alone does battle with the isolation and fear that so magnifies all human suffering."
"Just as the cells of the human body respond to the alarm bell of pain in ways that help to heal the injury, so we must be people who respond to, rather than merely observe, the suffering of our neighbor," she writes. "There is no other way for the body of human society, and especially the body of the church, to stay well."
3. "Much of the pain we witness these days," Nelson notes, "happens on the far side of a television screen: a million children starve before our eyes in the Sudan, a family spills the ugliness of its hatred on Jerry Springer." Indeed, we are "no more than helpless voyeurs to other people's suffering. Even when the need is close to home, the temptation is often to distance and protect ourselves. We create barriers of busyness or self-consciousness; we remind ourselves that there are people 'more qualified' to deal with our widowed neighbor's grief, as if what was required of us was anything more complicated than our company."
4. Christ commissions us to tend "to the suffering," which requires not only "medicine and caring" but also comforting and being present with "those who are despairing." Stanza three reminds us that other people's suffering is shaped by "their doubts and fears, their hopes and dreams, their worries," which may be different from our own. So we must be open to hearing "the truth of others' stories," even "when their ways are not our own." In the final stanza, Gillette addresses our urge to solve problems quickly and turn away from the suffering that endures. Instead, we are called to serve Christ "in daily, generous living."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.