

**A Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost
August 24, 2025**



Come to New Life!

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[Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – The Episcopal Church](#)

Luke 13:10-17

Illness as Metaphor

Jesus is teaching in a synagogue on the sabbath. A woman with an extreme back ailment approaches him. She has been bent over in agony for 18 years. Jesus, full of compassion, heals her, telling her that she is free from her ailment. Jesus, the compassionate healer, could not let her endure another minute of her chronic pain. Alas, the pedantic leader of the synagogue berates Jesus' generosity, indignantly pointing out that it is the sabbath and no work should be done on that day according to Jewish law. He says, "Have her come back on some other day to get healed!" Jesus points out that if your domestic animal needed to drink water, would you not untie it and lead it to water, no matter what day it is? This teaching put all of Jesus' opponents to shame. As well it should.

There are many things about illness that could put us all to shame. We have a terrible tendency to blame the victim. I recall the writing of Susan Sontag in her excellent essay called *Illness as Metaphor*, written in the 1970s, before the advent of the AIDS epidemic. She recounted two prominent ailments from the 19th and 20th centuries and how people responded to those who were afflicted. She named tuberculosis as the prominent illness from the 19th century, and cancer from the 20th. In the 19th century, tuberculosis, a very communicable disease of the lungs, was sometimes called consumption. It was almost a romantic illness, used in literature as a condemnation. Think of the book and movie *Camille*, and its operatic version, *La Traviata*, whose heroine was a consumptive courtesan. Ha! She deserved it! Also the famous opera heroine Mimi in *La Boheme*: oh, poor little thing! The illness was used to great effect in these fictional accounts.

In the 20th century, cancer has become very prevalent, with many people shaming the victims for causing their own afflictions. You smoke? Well, what did you expect! When the AIDS virus became prevalent in the 1980s, the fact that it often afflicted homosexual men became a good reason to shame their lifestyle. Ha! God gave that to you as punishment! As we moved into the 21st century, we found lots more reasons to point the finger in shaming: COVID-19 caught us all, not associated with any perceived sin, and actually helped us to see illness as a problem for all of us. But now, with COVID in the rearview mirror, we have moved on to shame anyone who is overweight. It is even called Fat Shaming. Jesus would call all of this a lack of compassion. Even if someone's behavior has contributed to their sick state, we should still have compassion for them for what they are suffering right now.

We are concentrating on the writings of St. Luke this year, the Gospel writer who is known to tradition as a physician. He often writes about people who are sick of some disease or some demon disturbing their equilibrium. Jesus is frequently presented as

offering compassion and healing, and he is often at odds with the religious establishment. We are told that St Luke was a gentile, so he probably didn't have a lot of respect for what he saw as an overweening emphasis on religious law. As a physician, he looked first for opportunities to heal the afflicted.

Luke illustrated healing in many ways. One of my favorite stories is how he relates that Herod the King and Pontius Pilot became friends at the time of the crucifixion. The two leaders healed their differences, even as Jesus was suffering. And I love how Jesus extended compassion to the thief who was crucified next to him, telling him that he would be healed as he came into Paradise.

There are many ways we can offer compassion and extend healing to others. The outrageous examples I cited earlier, of blaming the victim, should be replaced by compassion for where the sufferer is right now. I hope all of you have an active prayer list, to name those who need our prayers and compassion, and that you name them daily. It is an open question if our prayers actually help the afflicted, but I know for sure that the prayers help those of us who pray.