



Twenty-Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time October 15, 2017 A

- ◆ Living with Chronic Illness
- ◆ A Banquet — The Bible's Favorite Image of Heaven

A chronic issue: Chronic illness is a mystery to all who experience it.

The following article written by Annemarie Scobey appeared in the July 2017 issue of U.S. Catholic. Please consider sharing it with anyone afflicted with a chronic illness.

When Barb was 28, she was diagnosed with a heart condition that could lead to sudden death. Five years later, she developed a chronic autoimmune condition that causes painful blistering in her mucus membranes. Both conditions could be managed, but not cured. Barb is now 60 and looks back at that time when, in addition to the diagnosis, she had a demanding job and three young children and says her faith grew.

"My faith had always been central to my life, but now I wanted to deepen my relationship with the Lord," she says. "I needed strength and grace to live one day at a time."

Many people who struggle with chronic—and often invisible—diseases speak about the presence of God in the midst of their illnesses not as sudden flashes of almighty power but instead as centering, quiet, and constant.

Learning acceptance

Barb says that her condition caused her to reexamine what she wanted to put off in life for later. "My husband and I decided not to postpone joy, she says. "We took trips as a couple and with our children when we might have otherwise saved for retirement. I felt how much harder I had to work at living life compared to others who were healthy, and that reality is stressful. But I have come to believe that we grow from adversity."

Patty, a mother of four in her 40s, has struggled with chronic, difficult-to-diagnose digestive issues and intense pain in muscles and joints for most of her adult life. While now she has a diagnosis, treatment options are not robust enough to give her relief.

"I grieve the life I had before my illness, and I grieve that life I had once dreamed of," she says. "I used to be very active and athletic. I had hoped to work full-time, coach my kids' teams, and volunteer more. But my illness has made that dream impossible." She says she had to find new ways to enjoy life. For example, while she's unable to coach her kids' sports teams, shoot hoops, or ride bikes with them, she's intentionally about her presence as a parent. "I try to never miss an opportunity to talk with my kids, to laugh and cry and share," she says. "Quite possible, this illness may have allowed me to be closer with them than maybe I would have been otherwise."

Like Barb, Patty depends on her faith in an intimate, personal way. She has moved through the stages of grief—from anger and denial through sadness to acceptance—and says she journeys back through them repeatedly. As she does so, she speaks to Mary. "Some days, the pain is unreal," she says. "In those moments, when I talk to Mary, I swear I hear her answer. I will list blessings in my head to remind myself that while the illness is overwhelming at the moment, it does not dictate my life."

When Amy's daughter Colleen was diagnosed with a rare and serious liver disease, her faith took a hit. "I was mad at God," she says. "I stopped praying. It was a journey to the darkness." She says she went to confession, and the priest told her that it was OK to be angry with God, but that she could still talk to God, who would be there like a listening friend." And that is what happened. God listened and I learned what living with a chronic illness means for a family," she says. "You are not in control. Every day is a gift. You have strength you didn't know you had, and family and relationships are the most important things. When all we have is love, it is enough."

Walking with those who have a chronic illness

Often, the face of God is revealed in friends and family, especially those who seek to understand their loved one's chronic illness and respond with prayer and compassion. But because chronic illness is not always obvious or short-term, relationships can be complicated by shame or embarrassment the ill person feels at not being able to live a "normal" life. Well-meaning friends

can also cause additional pain by minimizing the illness, suggesting easy fixes, or not taking the time to understand how the disease may permeate every aspect of life.

Patty says that she avoided answering friends honestly when they'd ask about her well-being—even her best friend who was dying of cancer. “When she was quite ill, toward the end of one conversation, she asked me how I was. I did my usual ‘fine.’ Her eyes filled with tears, and she asked me why I didn’t trust her to tell her the truth,” Patty says. “This shook me to the core.”

Patty says it has taken work and practice, but she no longer answers “fine” to people she is close to. She says that she recognizes now that opening up about her suffering is not a display of weakness. Instead, sharing her vulnerability has helped friends to open up to her about their own struggles.

Markita’s college-aged daughter was recently diagnosed with a serious chronic condition. She says what’s difficult is how healthy her daughter looks much of the time. “Others don’t understand how one moment she can be normal and the next she needs to sit down or quit whatever she is doing,” Markita says. For example, her daughter would do her laundry one day but not be able to put it away until the next day. “Even her friends who knew about the disease would tease her,” she says.

Jenn, whose chronic disease was latent and manageable for most of her adult life, experienced a traumatic event that caused a flare-up. She says she has been hurt by people who don’t understand how a latent disease could manifest so suddenly. “A family member’s first response to my diagnosis was to tell me that I have always been a hypochondriac, and it must be something else—even when I had the bloodwork to prove it,” she says. It took several weeks before her family member started to believe Jenn and that she’d been experiencing an undiagnosed illness all her life.

But despite friends and family members who do not seek to understand, there are those who go out of their way to respond with a generous spirit. “When someone sent me a note or met me at a store and told me that they were praying for me, that just gave me the energy I needed to live the life I was handed,” Barb says. “At times, people don’t know how to talk about your illness, but just the concern that is expressed is such a gift. There is a bond that brings us together when we lift one another in prayer and love. I may have a chronic illness, but I have so many who love and care for me, beginning with God.”

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The Lord’s Banquet Table — All are invited.

As I have often said at Mass, the first reading for Sunday Mass is chosen to harmonize with the Gospel. It is not always easy to see the connection, but it is pretty clear this Sunday. Both the first reading and the Gospel use the image of a *banquet* to speak of our call to share life with God.

Today’s first reading from Isaiah 25:6-10 is often chosen as a first reading for a Funeral Mass. Perhaps as you read the text, you will see why.

**On this mountain the LORD of hosts
will provide for all peoples
a feast of rich food and choice wines,
juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines.**

**On this mountain he will destroy
the veil that veils all peoples,
the web that is woven over all nations.**

He will destroy death forever.

**The Lord GOD will wipe away
the tears from all faces;**

**The reproach of his people he will remove
from the whole earth; for the LORD has spoken.**

On that day it will be said:

**“Indeed, this is our God; we looked to him,
and he saved us!**

This is the LORD to whom we looked;

let us rejoice and be glad that he has saved us!”

For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain.

The mountain of the Lord is a reference to heaven (God entered into covenant with Moses and Israel on a mountain). At the feast, the “*veil*” that separates us from God will be lifted, and the “*web*” that imprisons us in ignorance and isolation will be brushed aside. Tears, guilt and shame will be replaced with joy. This is surely good news!

The Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

As in the two previous Sundays, Jesus uses a parable—a story—as a way to communicate his message or make a point. In this parable, Jesus once again addresses the Pharisees and the religious leaders.

Like our first reading, the kingdom of God is imaged as a banquet to which all are invited to attend. The main focus of the parables is the *response*—or *lack of response*—from the invited guests. In this parable, Jesus continues to call the Pharisees and the religious leaders to conversion. Two invitations have been extended but the invitees refuse to come. Some even abuse and kill

the servants delivering the invitations (a reference to the killing of Old Testament prophets and the early Christian missionaries).

Scholars tell us that the verses about sending in the troops and the burning of the city were added later. They refer to the Romans' burning of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., almost 40 years after Jesus' death. This terrible event is interpreted by Matthew as God punishing the Jews for refusing to accept Christ. Of course today we would not agree with such an interpretation. As we know, terrible things can happen to good and bad people, to faithful and unfaithful communities.

It would be wrong to assume that the king in the story represents God, which would leave us with a pretty nasty image of a punishing God, rather than of a God who saves. As stated above, the main point of the parable is *not* about what God is like, but about the *negative response* of the religious leaders to Jesus' call to enter the kingdom that he is inaugurating.

The poorly dressed man at the wedding banquet

The poorly dressed or underdressed man at the banquet symbolizes all who may initially respond to Jesus' call to conversion, but who may fail miserably to live by the values of the kingdom he is inaugurating. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul lists some of the values that those present at Jesus' banquet are called to live by. He writes: "*Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience*" (3:12). While all are invited to God's banquet, not all are willing to come. Of those who come, not all are willing to live by Jesus' values.

Examples of how we find excuses to avoid doing good

Reflecting on today's Gospel, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

God is continually calling us, as individuals and as a community to a deeper and more authentic life. But, alas, this precious invitation is like the seed that fell among the thorns. It gets choked. A brief look at our lives will show how this happens.

There is that letter I know I should write, but I'm just not in the mood.

There is that sick person I know I should visit, but right now my favourite programme is on television.

I know I need to pray, but I just don't seem to be able to find time for it.

I know I should make an effort to get to Mass on time (or just to get to Mass at all), but something always gets in the way.

I know I should be more charitable towards X, but I just can't summon up the will to make the effort.

I know that dishonesty is wrong, but I tell myself that everybody does it, and what I do is minor compared to what others are up to.

I know I don't do my job as well as I should, but why should I break my back when others aren't pulling their weight?

I know I drink too much, but I'm under a lot of pressure these days.

I know I should spend more time with my children, but I need that overtime money.

One could go on. Each of us, if we got down to it, could draw up quite a long list of things which we know, in our heart of hearts, we should do, or should not do, but which we refuse to look at. And we have no shortage of excuses. They spring up to our defence like over-enthusiastic security guards.

The excuses that kept the invited guests from attending the wedding feast weren't all bad. In fact, in most cases they were perfectly good ones: one man wanted to attend to his land; another to his business; and so on. But this is precisely what makes them so dangerous. We don't see them as posing a threat.

The greatest danger facing us is not that we might abandon God and turn to evil, but rather that we might just ignore his invitation. To ignore God's invitation altogether is the worst form of refusal. It implies indifference. Indifferent people are the hardest to convert.

We are invited not merely as individuals but as a community. It is the banquet of the new People of God, namely, the Christian community. The invitation challenges us to give up our isolationism, our exclusivism. Our self-sufficiency. To accept means to admit our need and willingness to receive from others, to share with others, to associate with others, and to collaborate with others.

We don't have to earn our place at the banquet. We are invited. It seems so simple to come to an unearned banquet. However, for class-conscious people, that can be difficult.

Have a blessed week,

