

Today's readings walk a thin line between sin and sickness. In biblical times, if you were sick, many people thought you were a sinner, as though God were punishing you for your sin by giving you some illness. We don't think that way today. At least, we're not supposed to. But many sick people still ask themselves, "What did I do wrong?" If you are diagnosed with some disease, or even if someone you love is suddenly threatened, you may wonder, "How could this happen? Is God angry? Is God trying to get back at me?" Probably not, but the questions are there.

One reason we wonder if an illness came from sin is that sin causes discomfort. Sin causes a physical and emotional reaction. When we have offended God, injured a neighbor, or betrayed what we believe in, we don't feel good about it. We feel the tension in our stomach or in the shoulders. Our heart races. Our voice becomes more intense. We don't eat right. We have trouble sleeping. We cannot focus on our work. In a sense, sin can make you sick. So when we get sick, we might wonder if sin caused it. Usually sickness has nothing to do with sin. It happens because we are humans and our life will end one day; our bodies can heal themselves very well, but only for a while. God made us imperfect, so that we would yearn for him. Our sickness is not necessarily a sign of our sin; it is a sign of our mortality and our dependence on God.

With a leper in the first reading and a leper in the gospel, today's responsorial psalm is about being sick. Psalm 32 says, "My body wasted away; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." So the sick person has a heart to heart conversation with God, confesses sin and receives forgiveness. At first, this sounds like a poor strategy. After all, if you're sick and you want to be well, you pray for healing, not forgiveness. But if you want a prayer answered, you might have to make the right prayer. As you know, if you pray for healing, you may or may not get healed. I'm sure God loves to hear our prayers for healing, but God does not always respond to them the way we'd like. However, if you pray for forgiveness, you will be forgiven. God receives that prayer and grants it. It's a different strategy: Being forgiven brings an inner peace that may in fact work its own healing.

The psalm says, "I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation." When we experience the saving love of God, it fills us with joy. Happiness can heal. Laughter lightens the heart. Our confidence grows, and our spirits soar.

The Catholic Church has stated that as a general rule sickness cannot "be regarded as a punishment inflicted on each individual for personal sins" (*Pastoral Care of the Sick*, 2). But if you have either one – sin or sickness – it is appropriate to pray, "I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble." Even if we do not receive healing from illness, we can receive something better: we can receive healing from sin.