

Some beliefs are really superstitions in disguise. They often show up in conversations, usually as well intended attempts to show sympathy or empathy. But they have far more potential to harm instead of to heal. Comments like, “it was just their time to go.” Or “God must have needed another angel in heaven.” Or “It was God’s plan; we shouldn’t feel sad or question it.” While recovering from two complete hip replacement surgeries I heard comments that are little different but same sort of thing: “you are too young to have this happen to you, what did you do to make your hips wear out so fast?” When I asked my surgeons and physical therapists this question, they thought it was not a good one because there is no answer and contrary to our superstitious belief, there is no age limit on bones and joints. It was probably a combination of multiple factors that led to the development of a disease in my hip joints; and blaming me or shaming me or looking down on me for it will do nothing to help me heal. Instead, such a question is most likely an expression of fear or discomfort because my situation exposed the fallacy that hip replacements are only for people of a certain age or someone who had an accident.

I even had a family member unfriend me on Facebook because of my surgeries. And said some unkind things about me. When confronted about those behaviors, they confessed seeing someone they are related to who is younger than they are have such a severe disease made them afraid it could happen to them.

When our false beliefs – the ones usually based on stereotypes, misinformation, or prejudices around disease, age, race, gender, color, religion, orientation – get challenged or proven wrong, it can cause discomfort, fear, and disruption. It is natural to look for any form of stability in a world where there are no guarantees. Superstitions exist to give the illusion of certainty in an uncertain world, but we don’t usually call them superstitions. We dress them up as science or religion or what we deserve.

To be clear, I am not talking about consequences of our actions. That is something different. If you choose to park illegally and get a ticket, that is a consequence of a choice. I am not talking about that. I am talking about confusing consequences for superstitions, the belief that if something beyond our control happens it is either our fault for something we have done or God’s fault because God was punishing us or planned it, because we mistakenly think that is what it means for God to be all powerful.

This is nothing new. It has been with us for hundreds of thousands of years. We can see it in the Bible. If you read through the psalms you will come across psalms where the author is angry at God because they lived a blameless life and are suffering illness or poverty or loss while their wicked neighbor who caused harm got blessings galore in the form of money, success, health, and popularity. That can't be right, that can't be the way God wants it.

And it isn't. But it is easier to blame God or self because there are so many things we are powerless to affect. Since we can't fix the problem, we fix the blame because that gives us some comfort. Which is why challenging or contradicting this assumption can lead to things like family members estranging each other.

Contradicting such unhealthy superstitions disguised as beliefs is what Jesus is up to in our Gospel today where the author described how Jesus used his power to manifest the love of God on earth. Did you notice in today's Gospel great crowds of people came to Jesus, and the people in those crowds who weren't his followers were the ill? This is an important detail to pay attention to.

In Jesus' day, and long before Jesus, the accepted belief in society and religion was that any disability, illness, or deformity, was a sign of God's punishment or displeasure. And was evidence a person or their family did something terrible and deserved punishment. Which means in some cases, disease was considered a justifiable reason to exclude a sick person from their family and community, not something to be cured or cared for. I learned the hard way this falsity exists today when I saw people turn from me in disgust, believing the disease the surgeons removed from my body made me of less value.

That Jesus healed people should never be taken for granted. Jesus used the power of God not to punish, not to judge, not to exclude, but to heal. Jesus did not use the power of God to endorse the fallacies of the time, he did not use God's power to gain wealth, status, or property for himself or his followers. He used that power to disprove the belief that illness is a sign of God's wrath by welcoming and healing those who were ill and suffering. God incarnate, God with us in Jesus shows us God is all powerful, and this power is God's love, embodied in mercy, forgiveness, and restoring people to wholeness. Which means things like aging, disease, illness are not divine punishments, they are simply part of life.

That is what Jesus' teaching about blessings and woes in the Gospel is about. Another superstition of the time and perhaps our time, was that if you had money, prestige, and property they were signs of God's blessing or favor, proving you were better than others in God's eyes and could get away with not caring for your neighbor. When Jesus pronounced blessings on the poor, the hungry, the

grieving, and the oppressed he was stating that these are people who have a special place in God's heart. This does not mean the poor and suffering are superior to others, nor that they deserve to stay in poverty. It means God is with them in their suffering and notices who causes them to suffer.

When Jesus pronounced woes on the wealthy, those who look down on others, who do not share and do not care, who use their wealth and status to separate themselves from their neighbors, Jesus was saying he pities them because God will judge them harshly.

Jesus turning society's and religion's superstitious blessings into woes and visa versa is both a commentary on the inequality of the present time and the promise God's Kingdom will reverse the inequalities our human fears and superstitions create and hold on to. This reversal is not a punishment, although it might feel like it to some, it is God's intention for the world, for all of us.

Which means whenever we welcome those society would prefer to ignore, when we refuse to blame a person or God for illness, when we grieve with someone instead of blame God for a loss, when we make room for the differently abled or those who can't join us for in-person worship by enhancing our on-line worship option, we are joining with Jesus transforming superstition into love and reminding someone they are loved by God. These things help create a little piece of God's Kingdom right here, transforming hurt into healing not only of individuals, but of the world.

It is not easy to let go of those superstitions, after all they look simple and clear and are so easy to say and remember. They give such a comfortable buffer between us and pain; and might even make us feel better by giving the illusion of certainty in a world where you can eat healthy foods, exercise, and still gain weight and get sick, never smoke a day in your life and get diagnosed with lung cancer, be a faithful, loving spouse whose partner wants to end the relationship, be a good driver and get in a car accident. Children who caused no offense still get caught in the crossfire of school shootings. None of these things are God's will. They can make us feel powerless, afraid and can cause us to exchange hope for fatalism. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can turn to Jesus who manifests God's love for all people and the world by turning woes into blessings and blessings into woes and restores the excluded to wholeness of body, mind, heart, and strength. So, when we are confronted with situations that contradict those harmful superstitions we can have the power, the compassion, and the grace to see them through God's Light and love and find ourselves part of the restoration of God's kingdom here on earth.