

Voices: Imagining the church as a hospital for the spiritually ill

June 21, 2017

When people think of the church, what images come to mind?



Bob Ellis

Some picture the church as a beautiful architectural space filled with smiling people dressed in their Sunday best. Such an image may lead to the notion of the church as a showroom for saints. Or perhaps some imagine the church as an intricately carved oaken china cabinet with leaded-glass doors, filled with the finest Wedgwood china and Waterford crystal. While there is great value in beautiful worship spaces that artistically glorify God, the notion of church people as fine bone china is sadly off the mark. If we are honest, those of us in the church must confess that instead of being fine china, we are all too often chipped, cracked, stained by the past and broken.

Perhaps a better metaphor for the church is that of a hospital for sick people. It's a biblical image. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," those "sick of soul." And Jesus referred to himself as a physician who has come for sick people, for those who know they need help. While at the same time, Jesus recognized he has nothing to offer those who think they already

are spiritually healthy.

Imagine your church



Imagine the church where you worship as a hospital for the spiritually ill. Or maybe think of it as an emergency clinic for those desperately sick of soul, or a spiritual rehabilitation facility for long-term recovery, or a treatment center for those who have relapsed into spiritually destructive addictions.

Or the image may be of the church as a waiting room, filled with people who have arrived for an appointment, yet unsure if they actually want to sign in and visit the doctor, who keep putting it off in hope of ignoring the pain. In such an ecclesial waiting room, some of us may be able to encourage the reluctant, giving testimony about how the Great Physician is helping us. Perhaps we'd even offer to go in to the appointment with them, to provide moral support.

The hospital metaphor might also suggest that, as a church, we need the soulful equivalent of ambulances that take us as spiritual EMTs to places in our towns where people are in acute need, hurt by life, wounded by sinfulness or confused about where to go for help.

Where is the greatest need?

With such an image in mind, we should ask: Where are the greatest needs around us? Maybe among the down-and-outs or the up-and-outs, the desperately ill or those numbed by pain into soulish lethargy. Where would your church find the most-needy people in your city, the ones most

desperate for care? Likely, that is where we should be concentrating our attention.

If this hospital metaphor for the church is valid, then an obvious implication would be that under no circumstances could we ever turn someone away because her or his spiritual illness was too severe, or think someone has to change behavior or get healthy before becoming part of our community.

Think what it would be like if your local hospital turned sick people away because they weren't already well. It's unimaginable. Just so with the church—we dare not think anyone is unworthy of entering our doors because of their weakness, pain or failings.

Think of Jesus

Jesus often was accused of foolishness because he spent too much time with spiritually sick people. Instead of shunning the broken, he invited them into his kingdom. To be sure, he called those sick of soul to repentance and to move toward wholeness, all the while inviting them to come near to him. Jesus never turned people away because they were broken of soul or slow to heal.

Think of Peter, whom Jesus called "Satan" at one point and who denied Christ three times. And yet Peter, with all his failings, was part of the innermost circle of Jesus' followers while he was spiritually broken.

Falling prey

By contrast, the only people Jesus responded to with harshness were the religiously respectable, who kept all the ecclesial rules and thought they were too good to be around people broken by life. Jesus called such religious folks hypocrites on their way to complete self-destruction.

Sadly, those of us in the church who have figured out how to live culturally

respectable lives according to the norms of American Christianity all too often fall prey to the temptation of hypocrisy, thinking we are spiritually superior to others who aren't already making progress in a treatment plan with the healer.

The truth, of course, is we all are poor of spirit, and when we humbly acknowledge that reality, we place ourselves in a position to become wounded witnesses, inviting others to join us in the hospital that is the church, all of us patients of the great physician.

Bob Ellis is associate dean for academics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary in Abilene, Texas. This column was adapted from [a blog featured on the website of First Baptist Church in Abilene](#).