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Stuart Love
slove@pepperdine.edu

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The Man with Dropsy

BY STUART L. LOVE

> *On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" And they could not reply to this. (Luke 14:1–6)*[1]

How many of us are acquainted with the healing of the man with dropsy? When I refer to this story in church settings or college classes, questions arise like, What is dropsy? Is there such a story? Where is it found? The account is far less familiar than healing stories like the cleansing of a leper (Luke 5:12–16), the paralytic let down through a torn-up roof (Luke 5:17–26), the Gerasene demoniac named "Legion" (Luke 8:26–39), or the hemorrhaging woman (Luke 8:42b–48)—to mention only a few in Luke.

One scholar, John P. Meier, places this healing in a "catchall" or "umbrella" category, meaning that there is only one occurrence of its type and that this type is found in only one independent source.[2] It is a Sabbath healing, the fourth conflict over Sabbath observances in Luke (6:1–5; 6:6–11; 13:10–17). The incident parallels the healing of a crippled woman on a Sabbath (13:10–17), which heightens Luke's use of gender pairs. It is a Sabbath healing, but with a peculiar twist: it takes place at a dinner banquet in a Pharisee's home rather than in a synagogue.[3]

The healing itself unleashes a controversy among Jesus, his host ("a leader of the Pharisees"), and other lawyers and Pharisees who attend the dinner (14:1, 3). Joseph Fitzmyer captures the healing's significance: Jesus' action

> in curing the man and his words about his doing so rightly on a Sabbath cast him once again in the role of a heaven-sent messenger or teacher acting with authority. He uses his power to cope with evil afflicting an unfortunate human being, and that even on the Sabbath. Again, the episode reminds the reader of the way the evangelist has presented Jesus in 6:5 as the "Lord of the Sabbath." Implicitly, Jesus also criticizes his contemporaries for their lack of concern for a fellow human being.[4]

The incident continues the theme of opposition related to Jesus' lament over Jerusalem at the end of chapter 13. There, Jesus links his Jerusalem fate to that of former prophets: "Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem" (13:33). The urgent necessity is Jesus' obedience to God's will (see also 4:43; 7:30; 22:42; Acts 2:23; 4:28). Chapter 13 closes with the state-

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ment, "See, your house is left to you" (13:35; see Jer 22:5–6). Following the more private setting of the meal (14:1–24) are teachings on discipleship addressed to the crowds (14:25–35)—teachings that include an absolute statement about possessions: "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all . . ." (14:33; see 12:33; 18:22).

At first, the literary unit (14:1–6) appears to stand alone—"So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away" (14:4)—but the incident triggers a series of three dinner-table exchanges (vv. 7–11, 12–14, 15–24) with interrelated and consequential teachings concerning the rule and reign of God.[5] This is so for two reasons. First, the man is an impure, dishonored, marginalized person, which situates him among those identified as "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (14:13, 21)—groups at the very heart of Jesus' mission to the poor in Luke (4:18–19; 7:22; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:2–3). Second, the specific malady, dropsy, features what Braun has described as "the symbolic and rhetorical value of the disease's paradoxical symptom, namely the unquenchable craving for drink though the body is inflated with fluid, a craving which, when indulged, serves not to ease but to feed the disease."[6] If so, the man's condition possibly exploits "the symbolic and rhetorical value" of the disease, that is, as a "Cynic metaphor for consuming passions"—greed and gluttony. Dropsy, known today as edema, is not so much an illness as it is a symptom of a serious affliction. The term derives from the word hydropsie, which comes from the Greek word *hydrôpikos*. Persons suffering from dropsy experience excessive swelling due to a superabundance of bodily fluids. According to Fitzmyer, edema is "an abnormal accumulation of serous fluids in connective tissues or cavities of the body accompanied by swelling, distention, or defective circulation."[7]

First Reason: Jesus' Mission to the Poor—"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. . . ."

Luke's version of Jesus' ministry in Galilee opens with a controversial incident in Jesus' home synagogue at Nazareth that encapsulates Luke's view of who Jesus is and what he is doing (4:16–30). In fulfillment of Isa 61:1–2 and Isa 58:6, Jesus reads to his audience,

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because he has anointed me
> to bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> and recovery of sight to the blind,
> to let the oppressed go free,
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

After the reading, Jesus declares, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21).

This incident underscores a theme dear to Luke's heart: Jesus' concern for the poor. The larger account (4:20–30) also highlights both the rejection of Jesus by his own people—"When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They . . . drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill . . . so that they might hurl him off the cliff" (4:28–29)—and the acceptance of Jesus by outsiders, exemplified by the stories of Elijah and the widow in Sidon, and Elisha and the Syrian general Naaman (4:25–26).

These combined themes—the poor, and the rejection and acceptance of Jesus as God's prophet—are manifest throughout Luke, but especially when Jesus is invited to dinners at the homes of Pharisees. The first such invitation at the house of Simon involves a sinful unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' feet (7:36–50). Because Jesus lets the woman touch him (a social/religious purity issue), Simon rejects Jesus as a prophet (7:39). When Simon invites Jesus to speak as teacher (7:40), Jesus' counteractive response asserts that the woman, not Simon, has shown hospitality by the demonstration of her great love (7:47). Forgiven much, an impure outsider is accepted by Jesus, while a leading insider, Simon, rejects Jesus. The Spirit-led prophet brings "release to the captives" (4:18).

Purity issues take a different turn in the second banquet setting (11:37–54). On this occasion a Pharisee invites Jesus to dine with him along with other Pharisees and lawyers (scribes). The host is amazed that Jesus fails to wash (a ritual act of obedience to the law) before the meal (11:38). Jesus compounds the controversy by raising the question, "Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?"(11:40). The next statement, "So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you" (11:41), seems strange on the surface, but, according to Robert Karris, the declaration contains "a subtle play on the meanings of inside/outside

. . . inside and outside of vessels and of human beings created by God."[8] Although several meanings of the remark are possible, W. E. Pilgrim appears on target when he states, "Thus almsgiving constitutes an essential part of the Christian ethical life for Luke. Once more we meet the Lucan challenge to those who have, to share with those who have not."[9] The Spirit-ordained prophet brings "good news to the poor" (4:18).

At the third and final Pharisee-hosted dinner, the man with dropsy is healed. Several lessons are drawn by Jesus through verbal exchanges at the meal. First, there is a lesson for the guests (14:7–11). They should choose the lowest place at the table to avoid the public disgrace of being preempted by a more distinguished guest (14:9). A pronouncement on humility ends this unit: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (14:11). Second, there is a lesson for the host. Don't invite "your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid" (14:12). The host apparently practices a widespread Greco-Roman reciprocity ethic—friends who have things in common help one another in expectation that when times are tough, their friends will help them in return. We call this behavior "back-scratching." Jesus, instead, directs his host to invite those who are never formally bidden to such dinners, "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (14:13). This kind of hospitality conforms to the priorities of God's rule (4:18; 7:22; 14:21; 19:8), and their repayment is "at the resurrection of the righteous" (14:14). The cleverness of the day taught, "Don't invite persons who cannot repay your invitation." The kingdom's wisdom, foreshadowed by Mary's hymn, proclaims that the Mighty One "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; . . . has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (1:52–53).

Jesus' final table message conveys a pointed warning about the consequences of refusing an invitation to enter the kingdom (14:15–24). The excuses made in the parable of the great dinner—buying land, trying out five new yoke of oxen, getting married—far from being flimsy, approximate exemptions from a call to holy war (Deut 20:5–8). But nothing—no social or economic engagement—measures up to eating bread in the kingdom (14:15). Angered by the refusals, the owner of the house instructs his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (14:21). Why? Because "none of those who were invited will taste my dinner" (14:24). When this is done and there is still room, the master instructs his slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled" (14:23), probably an allusion to those "outside" Israel, that is, the Gentiles (see 3:8; Deut 32:21; Acts 13:46; 18:6; 28:23–28). The Spirit-ordained prophet brings "good news to the poor" (4:18).

Purity issues characterize all three Pharisee-hosted dinners. The sinful woman at Simon's feast touches Jesus when she anoints his body. At the second banquet, the host is amazed that Jesus does not wash before dinner. And at the third meal, Jesus, Luke states, "took" the man with dropsy, "healed him, and sent him away" (14:4). But why would an affliction like dropsy be a purity issue? The conception of purity and impurity is related to bodily wholeness. For example, a part of the worldview of the host and guests is that the body is not whole when an individual has either "too much" or "too little" matter. Eunuchs, the blind, and those with withered or missing limbs are examples of persons with "too little" body matter. Hunchbacks, hermaphrodites, persons with an abnormal number of digits (polydactylism), or individuals suffering from dropsy are examples of "too much" body matter. Both conditions are dangerous and possibly polluting.

Issues over bodily wholeness in the time of Jesus can be traced to biblical stipulations found in Lev 21:16–20 that disqualify priests from performing their duties. Priests with body "blemishes" are not to "draw near" to offer the food of God (21:17). The list includes the blind, the lame, those who have a mutilated face or a limb too long, those with an injured foot or hand, hunchbacks, dwarfs, and those with defective eyesight, itching diseases, scabs, or crushed testicles (21:18–20). In the social world of Jesus, the Leviticus tradition was known and stressed by Philo, Josephus, and the Qumran community.[10]

Taking these insights an additional step, illnesses in the ancient world are classified by anthropologists on a basis of degrees of impurity.[11] Purity is defined as normality and wholeness; pollution and taboo refer to matter "out of place"—dirt—a cultural system of order and disorder.[12] Purity rules are symbols, a cultural language that expresses and reflects larger social concerns, which work in concert with other structures of thought to deliver and support a common message. The human body is a center where purity issues are manifest—a microcosm of the larger social body. Order and chaos at all cultural levels (the individual or the community) indicate social attitudes toward ill persons. Accordingly, touching in a number of Jesus' healings is a cultural/religious issue. When Jesus touches or is touched by the impure, he is labeled a social deviant by the guardians of the purity system (the religious leaders). When he does this on the Sabbath, his deviancy is multiplied.

Second Reason: The Symbolic and Rhetorical Value of Dropsy

The second reason that the healing of the man with dropsy is interrelated and consequential to Jesus' teachings is that dropsy has a symbolic and rhetorical value connected to the disease's paradoxical symptom, namely, the unquenchable craving for drink though the body is inflated with fluid. This craving, the moral philosophers believed, does not ease the disease. Rather, it feeds it. Luke possibly is using a Cynic metaphor for the consuming passions of gluttony and greed.[13] Quotations from Seneca, Polybius, Horace, and Ovid document this widespread view.

- Seneca:

  > [I]f [someone] desires tables that gleam with vessels of gold, and silver plate that boasts the names of ancient artists, bronze made costly by the crazy fad of a few [etc.] . . . though he should amass all these, they will no more be able to satisfy his insatiable soul than any amount of drink will ever suffice to quench the thirst of a man whose desire arises, not from need, but from the fire that burns in his vitals; for this is not thirst but disease [i.e., dropsy]. Nor is this true only in respect to money or food. Every want that springs, not from any need, but from vice is of a like character; however much you gather for it will serve, not to end, but to advance the disease. (*adHelviam* 11.3; trans. Basore, Loeb Classical Library)

- Ovid, in a complaint on the "frantic lust for wealth":

  > So he whose belly swells with dropsy, the more he drinks, the thirstier he grows. Nowadays nothing but money counts: fortune brings honours, friendships; the poor man everywhere lies low. (*Fasti* 1.215–16; trans. Frazer, Loeb Classical Library)

- Horace:

  > If you were troubled by thirst that no water could quench, you would tell your doctor about it; then if, with possessions amassed you feel only cravings for more, would you fail to take counsel with someone about it? (*Epode* 2.2.146–9; trans. Passage; cf. *Odes* 2.2.13)

- Polybius:

  > [Scopas, the strategus of the Aetolians] was unaware that as in the case of a dropsy . . . the thirst of the sufferer never ceases and is never allayed by the administration of liquids from without, unless we cure the morbid condition of the body itself, so it is impossible to satiate the greed for gain, unless we correct by reasoning the vice inherent in the soul. (13.2.2; trans. Paton, Loeb Classical Library)

- Plutarch, citing Aristippus the Cyrenaic:

  > Those . . . who part with nothing, though they have great possessions, but always want greater, would strike one who remembered what Aristippus said as even more absurd. "If a man eats and drinks a great deal," he used to say, "but is never filled, he sees a physician, inquires what ails him, what is wrong with his system, and how to rid himself of the disorder; but if the owner of five couches goes looking for ten, and the owner of ten tables buys up as many again, and though he has lands and money in plenty is not satisfied but bent on more, losing sleep and never sated by any amount, does he imagine that he does not need someone who will prescribe for him and point out the cause of his distress?" . . . [We] assume that the one who drinks on and on without stopping needs to relieve, not stuff, himself. . . . So too with money-getters. . . . [H]e who has more than enough and yet hungers for still more will find no remedy in gold and silver [etc.] . . . but in casting out the source of mischief and being purged. For this ailment is not poverty, but insatiability and avarice . . . and unless someone removes this, like a tapeworm, from his mind, he will never cease to need superfluities—that is, to want what he does not need. (*Moralia* 524A–D; trans. De Lacy and Einarson, Loeb Classical Library)

Braun believes the metaphorical significance would have been known to Luke and his readers by another connection, that is, the lack of self-control among those who attended symposium banquets.[14] For example, Lucian aptly saw the implication of diseases and diet in a comparison of the rich and poor:

> But the rich, unhappy that they are—what ills are they not subject to through lack of self-control? Gout and consumption and pneumonia and dropsy

> are the consequences of those extravagant dinners. (*Gallus* 23)

In contrast, the diet of a cobbler, sprats and onions, has "no use of doctors' visits" (*Gallus* 22–23).

Even though Luke makes no explicit connection between dropsy and covetousness, the metaphorical meaning was so extensive in Greco-Roman literature that it is reasonable to assume "that it was familiar both to the author and to the readers of Luke's gospel."[15] For example, consider Jesus' charge in the second Pharisee meal, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but *inside you are full of greed and wickedness*" (11:39). Or, Jesus tells those listening to the parable of the rich fool, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (12:15). The rich fool's appetite for larger barns to store "all my grain and my goods" (12:18) is transparent. Frequently in verses 18 and 19 the "fool" uses "I" and "my" to underscore his greed. Mistakenly, he muses, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry" (12:19). This is a paradigm of the dissipated life (see 12:45). Addicted to greed, could he ever be satisfied? The peril of craving after wealth leads to building more and greater barns to store more and more goods. And for what reason? So that he might pursue a wasteful, dissolute, squandered existence in banqueting and gluttony ("eat, drink, and be merry")! For Jesus, the man is a fool, because he leaves God out of his reckoning (Ps 14:1) and fails to be "rich toward God" (12:21). Finally, most of chapter 16 (vv. 16–18 are the exception) is devoted to warnings of the dangers of wealth, beginning with the parable of the dishonest manager (16:1–13) and ending with the story of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31). Each parable begins, "There was a rich man" (vv. 1, 19). The first parable is directed to the disciples. Amidst a number of interpretive difficulties in the parable (vv. 1–8), a basic question is raised: What is really shrewd, clever, practically wise? Is it not using possessions to gain one's future (v. 9)? Craddock admirably describes the second parable's opening:

> For the rich man, dressed in robes of royalty and fine Egyptian undergarments, life is a daily feast. The poor man, clothed in running sores, squats (lies) among the dogs, famished. Both die but only the rich man is buried. Now their roles reverse . . . and the change is unalterable. Up to this point all that Luke has said about material things comes vividly to mind. "Poor" is almost a synonym for "saint" as Lazarus enjoys the bliss of Abraham's bosom while the rich man lies in Hades.[16]

Between these two parables Luke states, "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him" (16:14).

Healing, then, symbolizes a transformation of character from greed to generosity, which may be illustrated in the story of Zacchaeus (19:1–10). Zacchaeus is a "chief tax collector and was rich" (19:2). Jesus "must stay" at Zacchaeus' house (19:5). His critics charge that Jesus has "gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner" (19:7). At this meal, voluntarily, Zacchaeus promises to give "half" of his possessions to the poor and to restitute fourfold anyone he has defrauded (19:8; see Exod 22:1; Lev 5:16; Num 5:7).

So, we return to our story. Jesus sends the man with dropsy away because he is healed. Sadly, the same cannot be said for Jesus' host and dinner guests. Their bodies are not swollen with excess fluids, but their "souls" crave the priorities of mammon. That is not the case for Zacchaeus, the grateful leper, Mary as she sits at the feet of Jesus, or the blind beggar. The critical question for each of us, and for churches in an affluent society, is, Are we free of the insatiable desire for more money—for more things—or for more pleasure? What does it mean to be lost? I wonder what Zacchaeus would say. I wonder what Jesus would say. Have they not already spoken?

STUART L. LOVE teaches Christian ministry and New Testament at Pepperdine University and serves as coeditor of *Leaven*.

Notes

[1] Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

[2] John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:706.

[3] This is the third time Jesus has been invited to dine with a Pharisee in Luke (7:36–50; 11:37–54; see also 5:29–32; 15:1–2; 19:1–10).

[4] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X–XXIV),* AB 28A (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 1039–40.

[5] Actually, Luke probably follows a common Hellenistic form and technique of narration known among Greek and Roman writers—*chreiai.* A *chreiai* is a "concise statement(s) or action(s) . . . attributed to a definite character which then becomes the basis for an expanded narrative argument" (Willi Braun, *Feasting and social rhetoric in Luke 14* [Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1995], 11, n.13). Braun explains that a *chreiai* involves "telling an anecdote about what someone did or said and then explaining its meaning and amplifying it." See Braun for an extended bibliography.

[6] Braun, 31–32.

[7] Fitzmyer, *Luke (X–XXIV),* 1041.

[8] Robert J. Karris, "The Gospel According to Luke," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary,* ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990, 1968), 703.

[9] W. E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1981), 136. See L. T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions,* Overtures Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981). The three possible meanings are (1) "give the contents (food and drink) as alms"; (2) "so far as what is inside is concerned, give alms"; and (3) "give alms from the heart" (see I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 495.

[10] Philo (*Sp. Leg.* 1.80; see also 1.117), Josephus (*War* 1.269–70; see *Ant.* 14.366 and *t. Parah* 3.8), Qumran Community (*Manual of Discipline* 1Qsa 2:5–10; *War Scroll* 1QM 7:3–6; see *The Damascus Document* 4QD and *Miqsat Ma´aseh Torah* 4QMMT B.49–54; *Temple Scroll* 11Qtemple 45:12–14).

[11] One example is Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966). An example of a New Testament writer is Jerome H. Neyrey, "The Idea of Purity in Mark," in *Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament and Its Social World,* ed. John H. Elliott, Semeia 35 (1986), 91–128.

[12] Douglas, 29–57.

[13] The reader should keep in mind that what is described is not accurate in terms of modern medical knowledge. But, apparently, it was a widely held notion in Greco-Roman society.

[14] Braun, 39.

[15] Ibid., 38.

[16] Fred B. Craddock, "Luke," in *Harper's Bible Commentary,* ed. James L. Mays with the Society of Biblical Literature (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 1034–35.