

Accidental lessons: My encounter with a chainsaw

I believe that prayer can heal, and I've witnessed miraculous healings in my own pastorates. So why was I, cast into extremis by a chainsaw, reluctant to pray?

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [April 21, 2009](#) issue

This past Christmas, I wished for and received a chainsaw. On New Year's Eve, while I was engaged in a woodworking project, the chainsaw slipped, grabbed my left sleeve, threw me to the ground, and in a matter of seconds dug into my arm, cutting my hand and wrist to the bone for about six inches. I began bleeding profusely. My arm looked like a piece of fresh, badly butchered flank steak.

As my wife, Patsy, raced me to the emergency room, I considered the possibility that I would bleed to death. I was hoping that if the Century's editors considered me obituary-worthy, they might lie: "Bishop Willimon, a dedicated foe of injustice, was injured while cutting firewood for the poor." The truth: Using a tool for which I have no training or talent, I injured myself while attempting to carve a wooden salad bowl. I consoled myself with the thought that if I survived, I'd have something to share with friends in retirement at the Methodist Home. A chainsaw gash trumps a broken hip.

To my relief, chainsaw injuries are just another day at the office in the Sylva, North Carolina, emergency room. In no time I was lying on a gurney and receiving shots of morphine from the same nurse who had earlier chided me: "Hold that bandage tight, Buddy, and stop dripping blood on my floor."

I was soon on the mend, but not till after a couple of hours of surgery and a couple of days of agony. Cast out of the hospital into a cheap motel room, no morphine to comfort me, I reminded God of all the favors I had done for the Trinity. As I tossed and turned I considered the possibility that my accident was God's payback for all the lousy sermons that I've preached. I repented for any hubris that may have

contributed to my scathing review of a book by Bart Ehrman (in the December 30 *Century*). I warned God that if some of the pain in my hand wasn't gone by morning, I would withdraw from the United Methodist Council of Bishops. I tried to think pleasant thoughts, but all I could think about was the scene in Mel Gibson's passion movie in which Jesus' hand is nailed to the cross.

It's humbling to learn firsthand how rapidly a mature, well-informed theology reverts to infantile bargaining, pleading and threats. Now in a long-term relationship with a physical therapist, I've reached a thank-God-*that-is-over* frame of mind—but not before a bit of theological reflection. My thought is spurred by a question put to me by a layperson: "I suppose your accident caused you to do a lot of praying?"

Not really. I did a fair amount of cursing my stupidity during my nights in hell, but I offered few petitions to heaven. It's not that I lack faith in God's ability to heal. Scripture repeatedly shows that God heals. The advent of the reign of God is accompanied by Jesus doing many healings and exorcisms. Paul certainly thought of healing as a sign of God's active grace, and the Acts of the Apostles shows that Christ's healing continues through Christ's people, the church. Then there's James 5:13-16:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. . . . They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick. . . . Pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

Although Luther didn't think much of the letter of James, John Wesley loved it. I believe that prayer can heal, and I've witnessed miraculous healings in my own pastorates. So why was I, cast into extremis by a chainsaw, reluctant to pray?

For one thing, I hoped that God would be busy with the mess in the Middle East and wouldn't find out about the mess I had made of myself with a chainsaw. After my stunt, the boss would be fully justified in demanding my clerical credentials, adding, "An idiot like you has no business caring for any church."

More important is my sense that this passage from James has, in our hands, done much mischief. In many of the churches I visit on Sundays, it is the custom for the pastor, at some point in the service, to ask, "Are there any prayer requests?"

Then cometh the reading of the sick list, mostly a tale of woe about the physical deterioration of the congregation's senior citizens. There may be pain, injustice and the ravages of nature elsewhere, but for us, the purpose of prayer is purely physical—and it's all about us.

A sign in front of one congregation proclaimed it as "The Place for People in Pain." My heart went out to the pastor: if these people are anything like me, being in pain makes them, well, a pain. "Forty Days of Recovery," said another church sign. Are you talking about Lent? I don't think we ever actually recovered from that illness. I was even in a congregation where the bulletin included two pages of "prayer concerns" with the sufferers categorized by their particular ailments.

This is not prayer as Jesus practiced and taught it. Bread and debts are mentioned in the Lord's Prayer, but infection and discomfort are not. Prayer in Jesus' name is noted for his demand that we pray for our enemies, not our illnesses. I've recently heard prayers about radical mastectomies, testicular tumors and sprained index fingers but can't tell you when I've heard a really good intercession for Osama bin Laden.

We've given ourselves over completely to obsession with physical health. People who otherwise never see their pastors do see them when they're sick. Sickness has become the most interesting thing that happens to us, that which gives our lives significance—and prayer is a remedy of last resort when other methods of treatment have failed. God, though lacking credentials, is reduced to being a member of the health-care-delivery team.

Jesus healed, but he was notoriously ambiguous about what we are to make of his healing work. He didn't heal every sick person in Judea—and when he did heal people, he often told them to keep quiet about it. Whatever Jesus' mission was about, it was about more than physical restoration: after all, everyone he healed eventually died. The church instigated the first hospitals and has always actively advocated for and ministered to the health of people inside the church and out. But only recently did health become the whole point of the church's prayer. I am concerned that an otherwise good thing—attention to health—has slipped into the realm of principalities and powers. Somewhere we crossed a line. Health care came to be immortality management in service to our collective notion that physical deterioration is an injustice and mortality an outrage. Finitude can be fixed if we put enough money into the project. We shall be like gods.

In this climate of collective fantasy, pastors stopped being priests and teachers and contented ourselves with being members of a “caring profession.” All this, I fear, is a sad reduction—if not an outright perversion—of the gospel.

In the waiting room, I heard myself say to someone, “My doctor, though stuck here in North Carolina, is one of the best hand surgeons in the world.” While my doctor has no apparent aspirations toward divinity, I found myself looking upon this man as a demigod. As Calvin said, the human mind is a permanent factory of idols. In pain and vulnerable, the human body is even more idolatrous than when it’s fit and happy.

Patient is the dumbest name for someone like me in pain. It’s like we’ve lost the spiritual means to know how to be sick. I worry about physicians and others who spend their days subjected to people such as me who, when experiencing pain and the inconvenience that comes with being mortals and not gods, have no purpose in life other than to demand, “Fix me and do it now, with no risk or responsibility on my part, so I can go on living my life the same as before I got sick.”

We are captive to a lie: I got sick, I went to the doctor, the doctor fixed me, and now I’m well. It’s a nice story, one in which we confidently invest billions, but it isn’t true. Most of those who get sick in my church go to the doctor, are subjected to this and that treatment (which may at best be somewhat analgesic) and then are sent home, sometimes for a lifetime of discomfort and decreased mobility. Health is always temporary. Some get better, some get worse; none is fixed. The Creator has decreed that no one gets out of this alive.

So before you pray, consider the sort of God whom you address and the possible cost of asking this God, “How then shall I live, now that I’m sick?” Prayer “in Jesus’ name” is a risk. Bring God into a situation and you don’t know where God will take things. I have known many who earnestly implored God to come into their lives, take away their pain and heal them of their infirmities—only to have God refuse. It was as if Jesus put them in worse discomfort than their illness itself by coming to them not with, “There, there, everything’s going to be all right,” but rather with a hearty, “Follow me!” They prayed for palliation and got instead another assignment. Only Jesus would turn a person’s pain into an occasion for vocation.

Prayer is more than my bringing my wish list to Jesus, asking him for occasional help with the heavy lifting. Prayer is also the risky attempt to let Jesus speak. So to be

honest, I didn't pray when I was in pain because the last thing I wanted to do was risk a visit by Jesus, which might make my life even more difficult than it was at that moment. I wanted to be pain-free, and I wanted healing now—no matter what Jesus had in mind.

I avoided saying much to God about my accident while I was down and out. But God did take the opportunity to say some things to me. Before my brush with a chainsaw, I was suspicious of claims for the pedagogical uses of pain. I now know better. For one thing, I couldn't get out of my head the sight of my body, reduced to red meat and spouting blood. Genesis 3:19b, on our destiny in dirt, sprang immediately to mind. Sometimes the truth that our faith has to teach can come only through a revealing God who is willing to speak even through a chainsaw to make a point.

In pain, rendered dependent in an instant (I couldn't even open a medicine bottle without help) and not in the best of moods, I rediscovered the gift of hospitality in others' welcoming hands: strangers in the emergency room, my doctor (whose first words to me were not "How can I fix you up?" but rather, "Let me first say how sorry I am that this happened to you"), my patient wife and attentive children and church friends. I've always preached the Christian faith as training in the art of dependency—experience of the divine through the hands of strangers—but sometimes God doesn't begin the remedial tutorial until we are on our knees. Though I wouldn't for anything repeat the misery of the past months, I'm much better at practicing the faith that earlier I only professed.

In my agony, I thought, *This too shall pass. I'll probably make it through this and one day have difficulty even remembering how bad I'm hurting now.* Though I was in that heightened narcissistic state that often afflicts people in pain, God got through to me, reminding me of all those suffering souls for whom pain is chronic, to whom even the coming of the dawn brings no help. That many of them can go on with dignity—worshiping God, caring about someone other than themselves, laughing at a joke, holding themselves accountable to discipleship—is one of the great mysteries of our faith, a testimonial to the God who works the nightshift. As Jesus said of his friend Lazarus's terminal illness, even this can be "for God's glory."

Paul said that the occasionally awful suffering of this present age can't separate us from the love of God in Christ. Paul was right. In spite of my utterly self-centered agony, I found myself thinking about my neighbors who don't have health insurance.

My recovery is going to cost around \$10,000, but I'll barely feel that pain.

Praise be to the God who uses even our worst screw-ups to instill in us empathy that we could never have on our own. We who worship God on a cross ought to know how to expect more of our times of illness. There was a day when *health* didn't mean just freedom from pain and physical soundness—it also meant wholeness, even holiness. For Christians, healing, as a gift of God, is always subservient to the gifts of fidelity and discipleship.

In the end I did pray, bypassing petition and heading straight to thanksgiving. I thanked God for my doctors and my anesthesiologist. I offered a special doxology for that nurse with the morphine. I also thanked God for the visceral, attention-getting reminder of my mortality and for my state of blessed, never-ending dependency that's sometimes obscured by the delusions engendered by transitory good health.

I preached on a recent Sunday, gesticulating in the air with my plastic splint for 20 minutes. After the service, a kid with purple hair came up to me and asked the question that no one else had the nerve to ask.

"What'd you do to your arm? Carpal tunnel syndrome?"

"No, this is a real man's injury," I responded. "A chainsaw did this to me."

"Bummer, man," said the kid. "You're just like me."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"I did a stupid thing too," he confided. "Busted my butt on my skateboard. Cracked my elbow. It hurt like hell—couldn't skate for two months. My friends made fun of me. Still hurts. Just like you, I said to Jesus, 'Get me out of this and I'll never skate again.'"

"Did you keep your promise to Jesus?" I asked my younger brother in Christ.

"Naw," he said, "all I learned was next time to be more careful about making any promises to Jesus!"

"Yep," I replied. "I learned a lot too."