

LENT IV

Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.' " John 9:2

This is one of the most important things Jesus ever says, in my view. People in Biblical times believed that sin caused physical illness and deformity, and the Bible is filled with examples of such cause and effect. *The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge*, Jeremiah proclaims, meaning that the sins of the fathers and mothers are passed down to the next generation.

Jesus refutes this. He assures the disciples that neither the blind man or his parents did anything to cause his blindness. What he says next is a bit more problematic: Does he mean, *God made the man blind so that Jesus could cure him and prove God's power and glory?* That's not a very nice God. What we have to understand is that in John's Gospel, sin is not a moral category about behavior. It's a theological category about one's response to the revelation of God in Jesus. Neither the man nor his parents have encountered Jesus before, so sin is off the table as a retrospective question. The question is, how is the blind man going to understand Jesus' healing act? What is his faith response?

Jesus' position here is critical, and I wish everyone knew and understood it, because the belief that we or our parents cause our physical illnesses or handicaps by bad behavior is not gone from the world. Certainly, stress and abuse can make us vulnerable to physical ailments, but that's not the same as thinking that our evil stepmother gave us cancer. Not even evil stepmothers deserve to be blamed for that. I had an elderly friend who told me that another friend of mine had gotten breast cancer because of her temperament; these kinds of ideas are not only wrong, but cruel. Blaming the victim. Jesus puts the lie to that.

I have just finished reading **The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks**, a non-fiction account of the life and legacy of an African American woman who died at 31 of cervical cancer in 1951. *The cells from Henrietta's tumor were given to researcher George Gey, who "discovered that [Henrietta's] cells did something they'd never seen before: They could be kept alive and grow."*[13] *Before Henrietta, the cells would only survive for a few days. Gey named the sample "HeLa", after the initial letters of Henrietta Lacks' name, to protect her identity. As the first human cells that could be grown in a lab and were "immortal" (did not die after a few cell*

divisions), they could then be used for conducting many experiments. This represented an enormous boon to medical and biological research.

Since they were put into mass production, Henrietta's cells have been mailed to scientists around the globe for "research into cancer, AIDS, the effects of radiation and toxic substances, gene mapping, and countless other scientific pursuits. HeLa cells have been used to test human sensitivity to tape, glue, cosmetics, and many other products. Scientists have grown some 20 tons of her cells. (Wikipedia)

The Immortal Life tells the story of the science of these unique cells and their meaning for medical research and development. But Rebecca Skloot, the author, also spent a great deal of time with Henrietta's children and other relatives, and the book is as much their story as it is Henrietta's and her cells.

Henrietta's family did not learn of her "immortality" until more than 20 years after her death, when scientists investigating HeLa began using her husband and children in research without informed consent. And though the cells had launched a multi-million dollar industry that sells human biological materials, her family never saw any of the profits.

In the course of researching and writing her book, Rebecca Skloot became deeply involved with the Lacks family, particularly Henrietta's daughter Deborah. She shared information with the family, took them to Johns Hopkins and elsewhere to examine medical records, introduced them to principals in the scientific and media activity involving HeLa cells, and eventually was able to show them the stored cells themselves and blow-up pictures of the cells dividing.

Skloot's account of the Lacks family is never diagnostic or judgmental; in fact, it is a testimony of compassion. But it's abundantly clear that the Lacks family benefitted from little to no formal education, had poor information and mis-information about what had happened to Henrietta and her cells. They suffered both from well-founded suspicions about the medical establishment's mistreatment of African Americans, and from superstition, fear, and paranoia about Henrietta's history and the implications for their own health and well-being.

When doctors began to take blood from Henrietta's relatives better to understand her unique cells, the family believed they would all be found to suffer from her virulent cancer. They were wildly indignant about both Henrietta's anonymity and her scientific fame, so long unknown to them. They felt that she, and they, were owed money and

recognition. They were angry, hostile and sometimes violent toward those, including Ms. Skloot, who attempted to approach them for information.

And Deborah, Ms Skloot's major source, claimed herself that she had been diagnosed as paranoid and schizophrenic, and her behavior certainly seemed to bear out those claims.

In short, I would say that Henrietta's family felt cursed: cursed by the burden of carrying Henrietta's cells, and they were ill-equipped in every way to deal with the implications of her life, her death, and her contributions to medical science.

They had all kinds of outlandish beliefs: that Henrietta had been cloned, that her cells were on Mars or the Moon, that her cells had made a bomb, that the cells had been joined with animals or vegetables to create hybrid human-animals or human-vegetables.

There's an astonishing scene late in the book, when Ms Skloot takes Deborah to visit her cousin Gary, who calls himself The Disciple. Deborah has made herself ill with anxiety about her mother's cells, and is agitated and disoriented.

Gary's brown eyes went vacant, unfocused, as he stood slowly from his chair, spread his arms wide, and reached toward Deborah, who struggled to her feet, hobbled toward him, and wrapped her arms around his waist. The moment she touched him, his upper body seized like he'd been electrocuted. His arms thrust closed, hands clasping each side of Deborah's head, palms to her jaw, fingers spread from the back of her skull to the bridge of her nose. Then he started shaking. He squeezed Deborah's face to his chest as her shoulders heaved in silent sobs, and tears rolled from Garry's eyes. ...

"You're welcome to this broken vessel, Lord," he whispered, squeezing Deborah's head in his palms. His eyes shot open and closed, and he began to preach, sweat pouring down his face.

"That you said in your word Lord, that the BELIEVER would lay hands on the sick, and that they shall RECOVER!" His voice rose and fell, from a whisper to a yell and back. "I REALIZE God that TONIGHT there's just some things doctors CANNOT DO!"

"Amen Lord," Deborah mumbled, face pressed to his chest, voice muffled.

"We thank you tonight," Gary whispered. "Because we need your help with them CELLS... Lord... we need your help liftin the BURDEN of them cells from this woman? Lift this burden, Lord, take it away, we don't NEED it!"

... Looking at me, (writes Skloot), Gary said, "She can't handle the burden of the cells no more, Lord! She can't do it!" Then he raised his arms above Deborah's head and yelled, "LORD, I KNOW you sent Miss Rebecca to help LIFT THE BURDEN of them CELLS!" He thrust his arms toward me, hands pointed at either side of my head. "GIVE THEM TO HER! he yelled. "LET HER CARRY THEM."

I sat frozen, staring at Gary, thinking, Wait a minute, that wasn't meant to happen!

Deborah stepped away from Gary's embrace, shaking her head, wiping her eyes, and yelling, Phew!" They both laughed. "Thanks, Cuz," she said, "I feel so light!"

"Some things you got to release," Gary said. "The more you hold them in, the worse they get. When you release them, they got to go somewhere else. The bible says (Jesus) can carry all that burden."

In John's Gospel, sin is not a moral category about behavior. It's a theological category about one's response to the revelation of God in Jesus. The question is, how are we going to understand Jesus' healing acts? What is our faith response?

But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." ...

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Messiah, I believe."

Amen