This great chasm between Lazarus and the rich man in the after-life conversely mirrors the great divide that existed between their lives on earth. They shared the same space, but they lived in different communities, different worlds. The Bible says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1), but in every age we have constructed our own worlds between which we place great chasms which none may cross. We do this with people who are different: a different clan, a different village, a different ethnicity, a different social standing, a different appearance, a different ability.

To a certain extent, it is necessary for us to create groups or categories. It helps us make sense of things and sort them out. It is impossible for us to process every single person and event individually, so we create categories, groups, constructs, in which everyone can find a place.

So, we have the category of, let us say, fat people, black people, tall people, short people, and that becomes the primary definition of who they are. As time goes on, we no longer see them as unique and complex individuals. Instead we begin to see them only in terms of their constructed world. And we generalize about the individuals. We “generalize” them and put them in their own world. Although we come to think of these worlds as being real, they are human constructs; they are made up by us. They do not describe things or people as they absolutely are, or as they are in themselves. They are merely characterizations, based on what are often rather superficial attributes.

From a historical perspective, however, few have been confined so firmly in a separate world as those who have intellectual disabilities. Jean Vanier, one of the foremost advocates for people with intellectual disabilities in the world, wrote, “I have come to the conclusion that those with intellectual disabilities are among the most oppressed and excluded people in the world. Even their own parents are frequently ashamed to have given birth to a child “like that” (Jean Vanier, Becoming Human, New York: Paulist Press, 1998), pg. 72). Even among the world of disabilities in general, people with developmental disabilities are the most excluded, as John Swinton points out, “… people with profound intellectual disabilities are the minority group that people with other forms of disability dread” (John Swinton, "From

This is true the world over. If you think of people groups as heaps, those who have intellectual and developmental disabilities will always be at the bottom of the heap, just about everywhere. In many parts of Latin America, children who are born with an obvious developmental disability are neither named nor baptized. In India, they are untouchable. In parts of Africa, they are ostracized and kept out of sight. In large sections of Asia a person who has a developmental disability (and his or her family) is said to have bad karma, perhaps due to actions in a previous life, and the family loses “face” because of the disability. In China, due to the one child policy, babies with disabilities are often “thrown over the wall” as the saying goes.

In all these ways societies show that they consider people who have developmental disabilities to be sub-human. They are dehumanized. In America we do this by creating social constructs, virtual worlds, in which we confine people with disabilities. As with the rich man and Lazarus, they may occupy the same space, but they live in a different world.

Healing in the New Testament

In the New Testament mentions some 23 miracles of healing being performed by Jesus. The conditions of the people Jesus healed run the entire spectrum: leprosy, paralysis, demon possession, various kinds of physical disabilities, a variety of illnesses and other conditions of which we do not know the nature. There does not seem to be a single clear case of Jesus healing a person with what we would today call an intellectual or developmental disability. We cannot say that he did not “heal” any of them. We can only say that Scripture does not clearly say that he did. Perhaps it’s not so important what types of conditions Jesus healed. What is important is that Jesus made space in his world for those who were sick or had disabilities. He came to them when society would not.

St. John tells us that Jesus encountered a “a multitude of invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed” at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:3). The fact that Jesus went there is itself very telling. This was a place where only those who had diseases or disabilities went. There, through the waters of the pool, they hoped to be relieved of their suffering. One wonders how many people who were well went there. But, there was Jesus, bridging the chasm between the world of the well and the world of those with diseases and disabilities. There he was, “in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

Salvation and Healing

In many of the accounts of Jesus’ healings, there is an interesting and, I think helpful, ambiguity in the language itself. For example, in Matthew 9:22, a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, approached him through a crowd and touched the hem of his cloak. She was immediately healed. When Jesus saw her, he said, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace” (see also Mark 5:34 and Luke 8:48). The word translated into English as “made you well,” could just as well have been translated as “saved you.” It’s the very same word in Greek. The English translator must refer to the context to decide if the word “saved” or the word “healed” is the correct translation in a given case. Jesus uses this word in a number of the healing miracle accounts (ex. Matthew 9:22; Luke 17:19; Luke 18:42).

So, what would be the best translation? Healed? Saved? Both? The ambiguity is intriguing. Certainly, the woman was healed of her issue of blood. But it could also be said that, through her faith in Jesus, she was restored to wholeness or wellness. Through her faith, she was saved from the suffering she had endured, both as a result of her illness and as a result of the social stigma of having a condition which her community looked upon as being “unclean” (in Leviticus 12:2, women are described as being unclean during menstruation, so this woman would have been considered unclean and, therefore ostracized from her community, for twelve years).
Certainly, what happened to the woman that day went beyond mere healing of her medical condition. She was restored to wholeness in the sight of God and, having been cleansed from her uncleanness, she was restored to her community. No wonder Jesus said to her: “Go in peace.” She could now be at peace with herself, with her community and with God.

If we understand Jesus’ healing miracles in this holistic sense, that is as having both physical and spiritual connotations, we will have the opportunity to view these miracles in a broader and better context. People with diseases and disabilities are not the only people in need of healing and salvation. All people are. In a sense, Jesus was giving the crowds who flocked around him a visual demonstration of the kind of healing all people need, and which Jesus came to bring. And, as we will see, the entire community needed healing.

Faith and Healing

In the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ healing, faith is OFTEN mentioned as either a cause or a means of the wholeness he brought to the people. In the examples we already noted above, that is in Luke 17:19, 18:42, Matthew 9:22 and others, Jesus said something like, “Your faith has saved you.” This raises the question of the relationship between faith and healing. A lot of people say that faith is the cause of the healings Jesus performed. They say that faith makes a claim on Jesus and that he healed them because of their faith. Many people today still believe this. They think that if they only have enough faith, or believe strongly enough, God will heal them of their diseases and disabilities.

But, in Matthew 9:27-29, Jesus says something that helps us understand more precisely the relationship between faith and healing. Two blind men came to Jesus seeking healing. “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” they said. Jesus asked them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” “Yes, Lord,” they replied. Then Jesus touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith it will be done to you.” And their sight was restored. This passage points us in the direction of seeing faith, not so much as a cause of healing, but more of a means through which Jesus heals the men. The men believed in the power of Jesus, but they came with empty hands; with nothing to contribute. They came only with their great need, passively awaiting Jesus’ healing. And through the means of their faith, Jesus healed them.

Health and the Community

As mentioned previously, diseases and disabilities have definite social connotations. In fact, there are really three aspects of diseases and disabilities. First, there is the biological aspect. A person has a pathogen that causes cancer or a missing chromosome that causes a certain disability. This is the objective condition of a person, which may raise significant obstacles of mobility or accessibility for a person with a disease or disability.

The second aspect is what we might call the existential dimension. This has to do with how a person experiences the biological aspect. We may interpret disease or disability from a spiritual perspective, wondering if God caused it and raising questions about whether or not God loves us. It may cause fear or uncertainty or anxiety. Having a disability, developing heart disease, or contracting a debilitating infection can have a crippling effect on people. It can cause them to retreat into their own world, sure that no one understands what they are going through.

There is often a large gap between how the community interprets a disability and how the person with the disability interprets it.
The third aspect is the community dimension. Society imposes its interpretation on a person with a disease or disability, which can often be even more limiting than the biological and existential aspects. People in the society at large do not know what it is like to have a disease or disability, so they resort to their imagination. They say things like, “I can only imagine what it must be like to have a disease,” or “I imagine you must suffer terribly from your disability.” There is often a large gap between how the community interprets a disability and how the person with the disability interprets it. This is alienating. And, so, the person with the disability retreats into the “world of the disabled” and, as Abraham said to the rich man, “a great chasm” is constructed and “none may cross from us to them.”

Jesus was well aware of this alienating tendency of communities. He knew that in addition to the biological and existential limitations people with disabilities have, society places on them additional limitations, another disability as it were, which can often be more limiting, certainly more difficult to overcome, than their actual disabilities. In Luke 17 we are told that Jesus was confronted by ten lepers. “They stood at a distance” the text says (that is, they stayed in their own world) and had to shout to him in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” “Go show yourselves to the Priest,” Jesus said. And as they went, they were cleansed. The priests would certify that they were free of their leprosy and could be restored to the community. No longer living in their own world, no longer alienated from their communities, they were free to go back to their homes.

Of course, not all divisions within our communities are man-made. The lepers were standing at a distance, because it was good for the community to quarantine those who had a serious communicable disease. The most significant human division in Scripture is probably the separation between Jew and Gentile. Yet, even this division was divinely established and served God’s purposes. Nevertheless, this division was eliminated in Christ (Gal. 3:28). The point is not whether a given division between humans is God-given or man-made, but what we as human beings make of it as a way of keeping people separated in their worlds.

Healing Communities

That is actually what Jesus said to the man from Nazareth who was paralyzed. He said, “Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” (Matthew 9:2-7. See also Mark 5:25-29 and Luke 8:43-48). I wonder if the man ever heard sweeter words than these. “Go home” – such simple words with such monumental meaning. The obstacles have been removed. The dividing walls have been broken down. He could now go home.

St. Paul wrote of this so beautifully: "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” (Ephesians 2:14-18) He was speaking of the barriers between Jews and Gentiles, but what he wrote applies equally to all the dividing walls we erect between ourselves; between all the worlds we construct.

“Go home,” Jesus said. And so, he has paved the way for us to bridge the “great chasm between us and them,” to bring healing to our communities, and to create healing communities – communities that, instead of alienating people with disabilities, ACCEPT THEM and invite them to make their home with them.