

Sunday, February 7, 2021
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

1 Corinthians 9.16-23; Mark 1.29-39

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/270541931131203>

(Sermon begins at about 13:55)

“Healing, Restoration, and Hope”

I can't help but feel sorry for Jesus. In today's Gospel reading, we are told that he and his disciples left the synagogue and went to Peter's house, where they find Peter's mother-in-law in bed with a fever. Jesus heals her. Then, later in the day, he is inundated with those who "brought him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around him." (Mk 1.32-33). This was obviously going to be a long day. Lest we forget, even as today's passage begins, Jesus has already put in a long day's work. Today's passage is just a continuation of what we heard last week, where Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath and was confronted by a man with an unclean spirit, which Jesus promptly dispatched.

And this was literally Jesus' first day on the job. As I noted last week, the scene at the synagogue was Jesus' first recorded actions in his public ministry. You'd think Jesus would want to ease into his ministry. Instead, there was so much to be done the poor guy hardly had a chance to catch his breath. And I'm guessing this was all pretty draining on him. Just teaching to a crowd can be pretty draining. Add on top of that having to deal with an unclean spirit, which I assume engaging and casting out demons is also a draining activity. It is certainly implied in other passages of scripture. So, I'm sure that when Jesus left the synagogue after a very busy morning, he just wanted to go back to Peter's place, relax, and have a nice, quiet Sabbath meal. But no. Instead, he must deal with the sick mother-in-law. Then came the crowds wanting to be healed. They had probably heard about what happened at the synagogue, so came to see if they, too, could be healed by Jesus. Welcome to your public ministry, Jesus. A Messiah's work is never done. And the way he deals with the events of this, his first day of public ministry, essentially sets the tone for the rest of his ministry.

Just the opening scene with Peter's mother-in-law provides a thumbnail sketch of what Jesus' public ministry and the rest of his life would be all about. "Taken as a whole, this first day prefigures major themes—healing, restoration, hope—that will define the heart of Jesus' mission."¹

Thus far in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus' primary acts are those of healing. The man with the unclean spirit, Peter's mother-in-law, and then the crowds who come to Peter's house. A variety of healings: curing disease, caring for infirmity, casting out demons. But all carrying a major theme: that healing is all about restoration. Not just of one's physical health. The healing and restoration go far beyond physical healing. Illness, disease, infirmity, can often cut one off from the ability to do things for oneself, eroding one's sense of dignity and worth. This is no less true today than it was in Jesus' time. Illness and infirmity take a toll on the whole person, beyond just the physical. Healing helps restore that sense of dignity and self-worth. But there is

an even more significant restoration that occurs. That of relationship. While not so much the case today—pandemic notwithstanding— although certainly in Jesus’ time, illness, disease, or infirmity often resulted in one being cut off from their community, from any means of support. Because illness was often viewed as rendering a person ritually unclean. And even closest friends and family often were not willing to put their ritual purity in jeopardy, not wanting to put themselves in a position of not being welcomed into the synagogue or temple, into the broader religious community. Healing restored a person to their social life and their ability to participate in, even contribute to, the community. Restoration to a fuller life that was often diminished through illness. Therefore, healing brought a restoration which was often a distant hope for some. No wonder so many people flocked to where Jesus was staying—hoping against hope to be healed, to be restored to their former life.

This is why, even though we may feel sorry for her and think it unfair that Peter’s mother-in-law, once healed by Jesus, immediately began to serve Jesus and his disciples. She was thankful, not only for having been healed, but also for having her dignity and sense of purpose restored. She was thankful for having been restored to her rightful place in her family, in her community. She was thankful for having her former life returned to her.

For many if not all of those coming to see Jesus, he was literally their last hope. In most cases, those coming to Jesus to be healed are the poor and the marginalized. Those who have been neglected by society and by the religious authorities. Those who did not have money to pay for a doctor. Those who did not have money to purchase temple sacrifices as a means of asking for God’s healing. Those who probably could not afford to make the journey to Jerusalem to make sacrifices in the temple to begin with. Those who did not have the resources to understand or even comply with what were sometimes complex requirements to re-establish and maintain ritual purity. These people were desperate. And then they hear about this guy who cast out a demon at the synagogue this morning, and word spread like wildfire. When they heard there was someone who could perform healings, who was willing to perform healings, they showed up. In hearing about this guy Jesus, there was renewed hope that many had long since abandoned. Yet one more aspect and sign of Jesus’ budding ministry. That he would be a source of hope to all who are in need.

These people in need of healing showing up as they did give an indication about what Jesus’ ministry, what this new religious movement, was about. What it continues to be about. What happens when news of Jesus’ actions begins to spread, demonstrates what faith is truly about. As Richard Rohr notes, “Our faith is not a faith that dogmas or moral opinions are true, but faith that Ultimate Reality/God/Christ is accessible to us—and even on our side.”² The people who come to Jesus in our Gospel readings are not interested in Jesus’ theological perspectives. They are not interested in his interpretations of scripture. They are only interested in what Jesus can do for them. How he can heal them and improve their lives. And likewise, Jesus does not establish complicated tests or criteria for helping them out. He does not insist that they believe a particular set of propositions or engage in specific practices. He is willing to heal all who come to him.

Jesus’ first day on the job, Jesus’ ongoing ministry, makes it clear what is important to him. The life of faith is not about the finer points of theology or biblical interpretation. Not that these

things don't have their place. But they are a luxury that is not always available or even of interest to those who are most in need. As we talked last week, Jesus' teaching was so intimately and intricately interwoven with his acts of healing, at least in Mark's presentation of the Gospel. For the Markan Jesus, actions speak louder than words. People didn't flock to Jesus solely because they liked what he said. Of course, they did like his message, too. But for those coming to him, the important thing was that he followed up his message with action. With tangible proof about what he was preaching and teaching. Remember, a new teaching, with authority. Authority that comes from a consistency between word and action. No, for the most part, they flocked to him because he could heal them of whatever made their lives unbearable. They flocked to him because he stripped away all the legalistic stuff, all the head stuff, and operated purely out of his heart. Putting the word of God into action, pure and simple.

The Apostle Paul recognized the importance of the "actions speak louder than words" approach to faith and ministry. In today's Epistle reading from First Corinthians, Paul talks about his voluntary service to others. What he views as his obligation to the gospel. What he views as his obligation to carrying on the ministry of Jesus. In his description of how he approaches his ministry, Paul writes: "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak" (1 Cor 9.20-22). Paul essentially says that his approach to ministry is to meet people where they are. Not to try to get them to believe the same things he does. Not to try to get them to intellectually understand who God is or that Jesus loves them. No, his approach is to demonstrate who God is. To demonstrate the love of Christ through his own actions.

That is what we are called to do, as well. To demonstrate the love of Christ through our actions. I am so thankful to be in a parish that does just that. That gets the fact that the most important thing about our Christian faith is to share that faith in word and action. With heavy emphasis on the action. Not that the words are not important. The words, our theology, or understanding of scripture, all that intellectual stuff, is important in that it informs what we do. But the words are not the end. They are only the starting point for what is truly important. For what Jesus demonstrated in his life and ministry. And while there is some satisfaction to be had in dissecting and chewing on the nuances of our faith, all that is meaningless if we don't put our beliefs into action. That is where the real satisfaction is. Or, as Paul notes, "I do all this for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor 9.23).

May we all be blessed in our individual and collective ministries, as we continually seek to live more fully into who God is creating us to be as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we work to bring healing, restoration, and hope to a world so in need of all three.

¹ Elizabeth Myer, "What 'Freedom' Is For: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany Week 5," SALT, February 1, 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/progressive-lectionary-commentary-epiphany-5>.

² Richard Rohr, "Faith and Doubt are Not Opposites," Center for Action and Contemplation, February 3, 2021. <https://cac.org/faith-and-doubt-are-not-opposites-2021-02-03/>.