

Mark 1:29-39      Healing and Salvation  
February 4, 2024

Last week, in the attention given to the epistle reading from 1 Corinthians about eating, or in freedom, not eating, food sacrificed to idols, we neglected to focus on the gospel reading for the day, which was from the 1st chapter of the Gospel of Mark. In it, Jesus is presented as participating in synagogue worship, where he taught the people, “as one who had authority, and not like the teachers of the law.”

There was a man there, who suffered demon possession, who created a scene of sorts when the demons, speaking through the man, engaged in a dialogue with Jesus.

“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? We know who you are. Have you come to destroy us? / *know who you are* - the Holy One of God.

Jesus responded by shutting him/them up and commanding that the demon(s) come out of the man. What is interesting here is not merely the exorcism, but that it is a *demon* who is among the first to recognize who Jesus is, and the response is to silence him, which becomes a theme in Mark’s gospel. He tells everyone to be quiet and not to speak when they learn his true identity. Books have been written about the Messianic Secret in Mark.

Of course, the news spread anyway and it became for him like being a celebrity, and he was forced to deal with the curiosity of the people, as well as their needs.

In today’s reading, the scene shifts from the synagogue to the home of Andrew and Simon, whose mother-in-law was down with the flu, or something similar. Jesus healed her, of course, and then we run into the account of how all the people in the town showed up with *their* sick relatives, and he drove out many demons and wouldn’t let them speak.

The next morning, he got up while it was still dark and went off by himself to pray. It didn’t take more than about a day’s worth of excessive attention to drive him into solitude. When his disciples found him, he said, “Let’s go somewhere else . . . “ Mark summarizes the activities of Jesus during this time this way, “he traveled throughout Galilee preaching in the synagogues and driving out demons.” Looking ahead, the next in line is a leper, and a paralyzed man.

It is striking how many people are presented as sick, suffering various diseases, and demon-possession, which for us is not the primary way we describe things in most cases.

We do, however, live in a world with a multi-trillion dollar health care system which attests to the fact that in our *own* time, people struggle with medical issues. It can become an obsession.

We are forced to conclude that various kinds of health concerns are simply a part of life, no matter when one lives nor what is the state of medical science, nor the technology available. But here in this aspect of our mortality, *we all get sick and eventually die*, God meet us in Jesus. This is not the only aspect of life where God is present (God is also present in our vocational lives, and our families, and in citizenship), but in the Gospel of Mark, issues regarding health are among the first ones to receive attention. What does it mean?

It is clear from all of the gospels that Jesus was, thus God is, concerned about our health, in every way that health can be considered; mind, body, spirit. Maybe that is the best way to understand the occurrence of demon possession in the story of Jesus, that spiritual health is a part of one's overall health. And we might also think in terms of the ability to have healthy relationships with other people as being a part of one's comprehensive health. And our health is more than individual, because it is affected by the health of the groups in which we participate: country, religious group, family.

There are many things that work against such health. The first set of things that come to mind is in the realm of physical well-being. The entire medical profession reflects both the struggles we all face and the determination of the whole society to achieve at least a modest level of wellness.

Diseases, the affects of living in circumstances, the water and air and food that we consume, as well as

the results of activities, either at work or leisure, can have a negative affect on one's health; and accidents happen. One thinks of football players at this time of the year, with the Super Bowl next Sunday. People who play football risk injury, some of the injuries can have lasting affects throughout life. In other professional and leisure pursuits, other kinds of injuries are possible.

And then there is the whole field of morality. We are sometimes hurt by our own actions, or the actions of others. We can disregard the well-being of another in pursuit of our goals, our happiness. We find ourselves capable of breaking promises, or at least failing to keep them. Conversely, we are sometimes the victims of the dis-regard of others. The general idea is that sometimes we willfully pursue unhealthy ends which have wrongful and negative affects in our own, or in the lives of others. We are responsible.

We stand in need of being healed and forgiven, cleansed and reconciled, both to ourselves and to God, as well as other people. Right here at the beginning of Mark's gospel we find Jesus, in the terms of his time and place addressing these concerns and restoring health.

To be sure, the decline of our physical and mental health is a part of aging and of the universal human experience of life and death. The healings and exorcisms of Jesus, and even the resuscitations, were, like the meals we eat, temporary. They did not produce immortality for the recipients, although in

some, they produced faith. So we must ask what the biblical emphasis on health means for us.

Just as in the case of liberation, one of the bible's other metaphors of salvation, healing points to the goal of our faith, which is the salvation of our souls, which draws us away from a solely, "this world," approach to life, towards the realm of the divine, of the eternal itself, where healing becomes complete.

We gather at the Lord's table for the eternal meal, to be nourished in ways food and medicine are not able to accomplish, for in addition to them; human beings also require if they are to be healthy; to love, and be loved; to know forgiveness and reconciliation; to honor God, and to honor other people, and to be honored; and to be thankful, for where there is no gratitude, there is no health.

Every time a healing happens, even an ordinary one; such as a cut that heals, or a pulled muscle, or a broken bone, or the pain of an injured relationship, or when medical treatments work; or the ones we call "miraculous," that sometimes happen; they are none of them given for their own sake, but to point us to, and assure us of, a place of eternal health. Think of how prevalent this grace is in our lives.

Thus, Christians have always advocated the pursuit of mercy, truth, freedom, reconciliation . . . and health. Let us not be discouraged, nor fear anything, in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

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