

Epiphany 5, Year B

February 8, 2015

Mark 1:29-39

“Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons... In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’”

Storytellers tell us that what happens at the beginning of a story has special importance, for it often signals what the whole story is about. The first two things Jesus does at the start of his ministry in Mark’s Gospel is cast out demons (which he does both in last week’s gospel and this week’s) and heal the sick. Given the importance of how stories begin, we might think that these are the most important things for Jesus in the Gospel of Mark.

And certainly there is some validity to that claim! For Jesus stands against all powers that would keep us from living an abundant life – and both illness and our personal demons (whether they take the form of addictions, compulsions, anger, prejudice, self-centeredness or any of the panoply of other demons that bedevil our lives) – both illness and our own demons can keep us from living our life to the full. Jesus wants to free us from the bondage of our sicknesses and our demons.

But our Gospel today makes clear that this is not **all** that Jesus is concerned about. In fact, when Peter and the other disciples hunt Jesus down after he has gone off by himself to pray early in the morning, and they tell Jesus that everyone is searching for him (presumably for more healing and casting out of demons), he says that he must be moving on to other places and activities.

As important as healing miracles and casting out demons are in the ministry of Jesus, especially in Mark’s Gospel, we are told that freeing all the people from all their illnesses and demons is not his principal goal. “Let us go elsewhere,” Jesus tells Peter, “to the neighboring country towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for *that* is what I came for.” Now, the Greek word which is translated “proclaim” is *kerysso*, and it is one of those words with multiple, layered meanings. In addition to “proclaim”, it could be translated “offer”, “reveal”, or “make known”. It carries *all* of those meanings. And what is *also* notable in the original Greek of today’s passage is that there is no direct object for the verb

kerysso. The translation which is printed in our bulletin **adds** a direct object – “the message” – which is not there in the original text. A more literal translation of the passage would have Jesus saying: “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim, offer, reveal, and make known there also...” Proclaim, offer, reveal, and make known – what? If not “the message”, which is how the NRSV translation reads, then what? I would suggest, “the kingdom of heaven,” “God’s rule”, or even more simply, “God”. Jesus comes to proclaim, offer, reveal, and make known *God*; and the God Jesus reveals turns out to be somewhat different from the image of God many people had in their minds.

We *understand* being healed and freed from whatever particular demons we may be struggling with; we understand that Jesus, and the God he reveals, wants us to be free **from** what keeps us bound. What we often miss, however, is what we are freed **for**. And yet our Gospel gives us a powerful example. We are told that Jesus comes to Peter’s bed-ridden mother-in-law, and takes her by the hand. “Then,” our Gospel reads, “the fever left her *and she began to serve them.*” She is freed *from* fever and freed *for* service.

Now, we all know that if you look up a word in a dictionary, there may be several different definitions for the same word. What I discovered about one of the Greek words in this passage which is translated “healed” is that the **FIRST** definition of that word is “served”. The **same** Greek word can be translated “serve” or “heal” - - which I think tells us a lot about what is going on in this Gospel!

Speaking about Peter’s mother-in-law, Professor David Lose writes: “It was her calling and her honor to show hospitality to guests in her home. Cut off from that role by an illness cut her off from doing that which integrated her into her world... Jesus restored her to her social world and brought her back to a life of value by freeing her from that fever. It is very important to see that healing is about restoration to community and restoration of a calling... as well as restoration to life. For life without community and calling is bleak indeed.” (...*in the Meantime* blog, Feb. 3, 2015)

This communal aspect of the healing was quite clear to people in the Mediterranean culture of Jesus’ day, for a person’s primary identity came from their relationship in community. We can easily miss this aspect of Jesus’ healings in our modern Western culture of individualism, where our primary identity is not as a member of a community. When Jesus healed lepers, for instance, even **more** important than the physical healing was restoration to community. They could rejoin the community that had totally shunned them and left them without purpose, relationship, or identity in the world. And so it is not sexist stereotyping when we are told that after being healed Peter’s mother-in-law immediately began serving them: this is what gave her identity, meaning, purpose in life and place in community. She was freed **from** illness, but perhaps even more importantly, she was freed **for** service. Fr. John Shea makes the distinction between cure, which provides physical relief, and healing, which includes this aspect of restoration to

community, and encompasses something even deeper. “Healing reconnects us to the deepest center of our selves,” Fr. Shea writes, “and through that center to God and neighbor. The flow of life and love through the intimate communion of God, self, and neighbor results in the dignity of service. As the whole Gospel will attest, service is not menial work. It is the hallmark of the new humanity that Jesus came to establish (see John 13:1-7 [remember the foot-washing?]). ‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve’ [Jesus will say later in Mark’s Gospel] (Mark 10:45).” (John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 53-57)

For too long, I’m afraid, we Western Christians have spoken almost exclusively about Jesus coming to save or heal me *from* my sins. (The Biblical Greek word for “save” can also be translated “heal”.) Forgotten almost entirely is the question of *what* we are saved – or healed – *for*. We have just seen that today’s Gospel gives us some very clear answers. We are saved to be reconnected to our deeper center, and through that center to God and neighbor. We are saved or healed *for* community, *for* love, *for* service, for restoration of our calling from God. And, as Jesus clearly states in this passage, we are saved or healed to “proclaim,” “offer,” “reveal,” “make known” – by word and deed – the risen Lord amongst us and within us.

Each one of us has experienced the healing (or salvation, if you prefer) of Christ in our lives. Sometimes that healing is obvious or dramatic; more often it happens slowly, as God’s Holy Spirit, over time, frees us from sickness, self-centeredness, or from our particular demons. I invite you to take some quiet time this week (as Jesus takes time for solitude in today’s Gospel) to identify what it is that God has freed you *from* in your life. As most of you know, I have been freed from the illnesses and demons of asthma, anorexia, depression and more. Ask yourself: “What illnesses and demons have *I* been freed from?” And then ask: “What have I been freed *for*? What calls to me? What – or who – needs me this week? How can I strengthen my connections to my community, to this church community?” And then “imagine that each time [you respond] to the needs of the people and the world around you, you are responding to God’s call and living into [the healing, the salvation,] the freedom that is ours in Christ.” (David Lose, *ibid.*)

AMEN