Epiphany 5B
February 4, 2018
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 and heal the sick. Given the importance of how stories begin, we might reasonably conclude that these are the most important things Jesus does in the Gospel of Mark: heal and cast out demons.

And I can agree with that! For Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10b) He stands against all powers that would keep us from living an abundant life – and both illness and our personal and collective demons (whether they take the form of addictions, anger, fear, prejudice, self-righteousness, self-centeredness, apathy, 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. And so, Yes! Healing and casting out demons are the most central aspects of Jesus' ministry in Mark's Gospel.

But…

But… it doesn't end there. Freeing us from our illnesses and our particular demons is only the first *half* of the equation. This is what we are freed **from**; but what are we freed **for**? What are we freed for?

Let's look again at today's Gospel.

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. **That** is the *second* half of the equation: what we are freed **for**.

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 the Greek word in this passage which is variously translated "cured" or "healed" is that the FIRST definition of that word is "served." The **same** Greek word can be translated "heal" or "serve" -- which I think tells us a lot about what is going on in today's Gospel! [1]

Speaking about Peter's mother-in-law, Pastor David Lose writes: "It was her calling and her honor to show hospitality to guests in her home. [Being] 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." [2]

This communal aspect of Jesus' healings was quite clear to people in the Mediterranean culture of Jesus' day, where 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, but as an individual. But when Jesus healed lepers, for instance, even **more** important than their *physical* healing was their restoration to community. The fate of a person with leprosy under ancient Jewish law is described in the Book of Leviticus, which reads: "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he **is** unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." [3] When Jesus healed lepers, it meant 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 of her fever Peter's mother-in-law immediately began serving them: hospitality in her own home was her joyful calling; it was what, in her culture, 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. (Our NRSV translation unfortunately uses the word "cure," which misses these deeper implications of what Jesus is doing.) "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)." [4]

For too long, I'm afraid, we Western Christians have spoken almost exclusively about Jesus coming to save or heal us *from* our sins. (Another Biblical Greek word for "save" can also be translated "heal.") [5] Forgotten almost entirely in Western Christianity 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.

Each one of us has experienced the healing (or salvation, if you prefer) of Christ in our lives. Sometimes that healing is obvious and dramatic; more often it happens slowly, as God's Holy Spirit, over time, frees us from sickness, self-centeredness, self-righteousness, addictions, or from whatever our particular demons may be. I invite you to take some quiet time by yourself this week, just as Jesus takes time for quiet solitude in today's Gospel. (If Jesus needs such time, how much more do we?) Take some time 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, and depression (God's still working on my other demons). Ask yourself in your quiet time this week: "What illnesses and demons have *I* been freed from?" And then ask (and I quote David Lose): "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." [6]

AMEN

[1] Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985, p. 331. The Greek word is *therapeuō*
[2] David Lose, *…in the Meantime* blog, Feb. 3, 2015
[3] Leviticus 13:45-46
[4] John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 53-57
[5] The Greek word is *sōzō*. See https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/lexicon.show/ID/g4982/page/1
[6] David Lose, *ibid*.