

Healed to Serve
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February 8 2015

Mark 1:29-39

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38 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." 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

A WHOLE TOWN HEALED

Once again the NRSV leaves out Mark's favorite word to smooth out the style. But, by now most of you know I'm going to put it back in.

A literal translation of verse 39 reads, "Immediately, they left the synagogue to go into the house of Simon and Andrew ..." Mark wants to convey a sense of speed and urgency in the telling of his gospel. Things happen suddenly and immediately.

If I were to write a commentary on the book of Mark I think I would entitle it: "Immediately: The Kingdom Comes Near." Mark is definitely a fast paced book.

And today the pace quickens even more.

From the home of Simon's mother in law Jesus heals and cast out demons at a fast and furious pace.

First, he heals Simon's mother in law who has a fever.

The Bible tells us that the disciples "immediately" tell Jesus about her illness.

Fevers can be the sign of something deadly, and that was especially true in the ancient world.

So, Jesus comes to her, takes her hand, lifts her up, and the fever leaves her.

The healing is complete because in one easy step she goes from the sick bed to the stove. She began to serve them. It was a miracle.

People apparently heard about this healing of Peter's mother in law and the exorcism of the man at the synagogue. So, when the sun goes down (and the Sabbath is over) everyone gathers outside the home. They want to be healed. They want to be free of their demons. They want to be saved.

And Jesus proceeds to heal the whole town. People with all kinds of diseases are healed. More demons are silenced and cast out.

THE MEANING OF THE MIRACLES

Why did Jesus do this?

What was the point of healing a whole town?

What message was Jesus trying to convey?

Certainly we could say that his healing and deliverance of a whole town was an act of compassion. God is gracious, and these works of mercy display that divine attribute. The healing touch of Jesus is none other than the healing touch of God come to earth.

We could also say that these miracles were a display of power. As we noted last week, the preaching of Jesus comes with authority. He not only says what only God can say; he also does what only God can do.

In the baptism of Jesus the Spirit of God comes to earth.

And now we see the power of that Spirit unleashed.

On more than one occasion the power of God in Christ causes people to ask, “Who is this man? Where does he get this incredible power?” People recognized that the ministry of Jesus was different. They had never seen anything like him before.

But, the healing of a whole city of dusk was more than an act of compassion and power. These wonderful acts of salvation were a sign that the kingdom of God had truly come near.

You’ll remember that Jesus preached this message from the very beginning. We talked about it several weeks ago. He began his ministry by proclaiming, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe.”

This profusion of healing and exorcisms reinforced that message. Sickness and evil didn’t have a chance against Jesus because he was no ordinary prophet. He is indeed the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

At this point no one was saying it out loud. Open talk of a Messiah could be dangerous in a world controlled by the Empire.

But, these people were quite familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures and the prophecies about the Day of the Lord. They knew the back story.

The prophets said that when the Day of the Lord came, the blind would see. The lame would walk. The dead would be raised. The poor would get good news for a change. The captives would be set free.

These signs would foreshadow the coming of the Kingdom. When you see these things happening, you would know that the Day of grace and judgment are around the corner.

Israel dreamed of that Day.
On that Day God would be her king.
The glory of the Lord would shine for all to see.

These miracles suggest that in Jesus the dream is coming true.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF KINGDOM

But, of course the kingdom of God would be nothing like the kingdoms that the people had known up to this point. The kingdoms of the world were about putting people down. The kingdoms of the world were about lording it over others.

But, the kingdom of God in Christ was about lifting people up. The kingdom of God in Christ was not about making war but about making peace.

The kingdom of God in Christ is about a time when swords would be beaten into plowshares. The kingdom of God in Christ is about a time when the lion would lay down with the lamb.

The kingdom of God would be about healing. The kingdom of God would be about casting out the demons that plague all of us.

Jesus knew that the people wouldn't understand. They wanted a kingdom based upon power and personal glory. I wonder if Jesus was tempted just to give them what they wanted, to give them the kingdom on their own terms.

Maybe. It certainly would be easier that way. That way would avoid the way of the cross.

Later in the eighth chapter of Mark's gospel there will be a turning point. Peter will finally say what everyone has been thinking from the very beginning. Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter will say, "Jesus you are the Messiah.

Jesus doesn't argue with that, but then Jesus also talks about how this Messiah, this Son of Man will also be a suffering servant. Jesus talks about taking up a cross.

And Peter doesn't like that one little bit. In fact, Peter rebukes Jesus. Peter wants a kingdom based on military power and earthly glory.

But, Jesus rebukes Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things."

Temptation followed Jesus every step of the way. And I think the greatest temptation was to turn the kingdom of God into a human kingdom.

STRUGGLE IN THE WILDERNESS

In fact, I think that's why Jesus withdrew to a deserted place to pray while it was still dark.

We might envision this as a sweet hour of prayer, a time for Jesus to recharge his spiritual batteries. But the location of this prayer suggests otherwise.

Jesus withdrew to the wilderness, the desert to pray. This was the same place where he faced the temptation of the devil after his baptism.

And I would suggest that that this time of prayer for Jesus in the wilderness was at least partially a time of temptation and spiritual warfare. In the desert Jesus fought to set his mind on divine things instead of human things. In the wilderness Jesus struggled with the temptation to just give the people what they wanted instead of what they really needed.

That time of prayer and struggle was needed because temptation would soon come in the form a disciple. Jesus prayer is interrupted by Simon and his companions.

The Scripture says that they hunted Jesus down, and asked, "Where have you been? Everyone's looking for you." Peter's statement indicates that he is challenging the authority of Jesus. Peter is saying in effect, "Why are you out here all alone. There is work to be done. The people want more miracles."

When it comes to miracles, the crowds can never get enough. There are many stories in the gospels that bring out this point. Jesus would always reject this call for more miracles lest the crowds misunderstand the meaning behind the miracle.

For example, in John's gospel after Jesus miraculously feeds a crowd, Jesus and his disciples board a boat and sail across the lake. The crowd makes the trek by land all the way around the lake and meet him on the other side the next morning. They want breakfast and dinner!

And Jesus said that what they really needed was not more bread but the bread of life.

In other words they were hungry for something that even the blue plate special couldn't satisfy. They needed something greater.

And this something greater was about the kingdom of God come to earth. This was the bread from heaven, the manna that would feed the people forever.

And that bread of heaven was with them. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” (See John 6.1-40)

Jesus was making this same point about his teaching and healing in Capernaum. Jesus’ ministry was about more than just casting out demons and healing diseases. Those miracles were signs of the kingdom that was coming. They were symbolic ways of saying what he preached from the very beginning. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe.”

There were other towns other towns that needed to hear that message. So Jesus and his disciples left Capernaum, and they traveled throughout Galilee “proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

MISUNDERSTANDING THE MIRACLES

The disciples will see a lot of miracles in the coming days. They will hear a lot of sermons on the kingdom of God coming near.

But, they won’t understand. They will refuse to understand.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, the ones who left their old man in the fishing boat with the hired hands are most disappointing in their lack of knowledge. Just after Jesus predicts his passion and crucifixion, they come to Jesus and ask, “Can we be on your right and left in glory?”

In other words, they want to be in charge. They want a cabinet post when Jesus brings in the kingdom. When the other disciples heard what James and John had asked they were indignant, probably because they didn’t think of it first.

And Jesus responded by saying that among the Gentiles rulers abuse power and lord it over the people. But, as the people of God they are called to act in a different way. Greatness is not measured by power. Greatness is measured by service. If you want to become great in God’s kingdom you do it by serving. (Mark 10:35-45)

Not many understood the importance of service. Most wanted to be served. Even Jesus’ closest disciples wanted this. It would take a crucifixion and a resurrection before they would even begin to understand what Jesus wanted them to do.

HEALED TO SERVE

But, there is one person in our story for today who did understand, Peter's mother in law.

We don't even know her name, but one thing we do know. She instinctively understood the reason for her healing. She was healed to serve. She went directly from the sick bed to the stove. And in her simple service she reflected the ministry of Jesus.

People still pray for miracles. They want to be healed. They want to be fed. They want to get rid of the demons in their life. If praying to Jesus will make it happen then by all means let's pray to Jesus.

But, we have to get beyond just wanting a miracle. Even the most miraculous healing will not heal us forever. We will be sick again. The hunger and the demons will return.

So what's the point? Why are we healed?
Peter's mother in law points the way. We are healed to serve.

Jesus made the same point when, on the same night that he was betrayed, he got down on his hands and knees and washed the disciples' feet. He told them that this was the example that he wanted them to follow.

This was a sign. The kingdom of God was about humble service. And with Jesus that humility would even extend to death on a cross.

TOUCHED BY GOD TODAY

We live in a world where simple service is often not valued. We too are tempted to substitute the kingdoms of this world for the kingdom of God. We too are tempted to take the easy way out and allow the demons to speak for us.

But, how would things be different if we believed that service was the measure of greatness? How would things be different if we believed that this is why we are healed?

It is through a continuous cycle of healing and service that we are touched by God. Notice how Peter's mother in law was healed. Jesus touched her. Jesus lifted her up.

Healing begins in those quiet moments when we are touched by God. It might not be spectacular. But, we know when it happens. Those moments are important because in those moments that we are also given the power to serve others in the name of Christ.

Quite often people enter the helping professions because someone has helped them, someone has lifted them up when they were down and out. And now they want to serve because they had been touched. How many teachers, doctors, ministers and counselors started their professional journey because someone reached out and touched them in a time of need.

Healed to serve is the formula for true vocation. This quote from Frederick Buechner is in the vocational section of our denomination's website,

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”

There are people in this church today who have found a deep gladness in that place where God has healed them. And from that healing they have been called to serve.

For example, next week we will install a new class of Stephen Ministers. They have had studied and prepared to care for others in the name of Christ. And I bet if you would ask them why they feel called to this ministry most of them would mention a time when they were in need of a listening ear and appreciated very much the help they received.

In a way all of us are called from the sick bed to the stove. All of us have been lifted up by the gentle touch of Christ. We have been taken from that place of vulnerability to a place of service.

This is not a once and done kind of miracle. This is a miracle that occurs over and over again in the community of faith.

Sometimes we are the ones in the sick bed. And sometimes we are the ones at the stove. But, we are always in the presence Jesus, who heals us to serve.

This is what salvation means.
We are saved to join of a community that serves in the name of Christ.

It is not a service born of compulsion or threat.
It is not a service that puts us down.

It is a service that lifts us up.
It is a service born of love and gratitude.
It is a service born of a hope that is eternal.

We serve because Jesus has first served us.
He has touched us and lifted us up.

Thomas Dorsey's wife died in childbirth.
And he wrote this song soon after this time of tragedy.

“Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired. I am weak. I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light.
Take my hand precious Lord. Lead me home.”

How many people have been helped by those words?
They express so well what all of us want and need.
Especially when we are sick and broken, we need Jesus to take our hand, lift us up
and lead us home.

I believe God is still in the business of taking our hand and leading us home. It
doesn't have to be a big thing. Sometimes its just a listening ear. Sometimes its a
favorite casserole given in love. Sometimes its a card or even a text.

But, through the eyes of faith we can see in these everyday, ordinary things some-
thing that is truly miraculous.

The miracle continues because we are still healed to serve.

Amen.