

February 7, 2021

Mark 1:29-39

Pr. Andrew Plocher

²⁹ As soon as they^[a] 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 sunset, 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.

It has been less than a day since Jesus was teaching and preaching. Less than a day since he freed a man from what bound him. Less than one day since he exercised authority and exorcised a demon.

In fact, in Mark, it's been a matter of moments.

Jesus and his disciples have just left the synagogue. They have left the holy space, the holy place, on this holy day. And they head to the house of Andrew and Simon, the first disciples.

They must have been anxious - these fishermen turned disciples. They must have been excited, or maybe nervous, wondering what their family would say. They'd been found. Found worthy of being disciples of a rabbi, worthy of an honor normally only given to top students who had studied far longer than they had, worthy of something sacred. And yet, they had stopped fishing and were now relying on the generosity of others. They'd left their families. What was Simon's mother-in-law going to say?

Or maybe it was a different sense of anxiety. Maybe he already knew that she was sick. That after witnessing Jesus release the man from his demon Simon has hope. Hope

that Jesus is a healer – a miracle man! Hope that maybe, like a genie in a bottle, his power can be harnessed one more time – to heal his mother-in-law.

There is something a bit like that in all of us, isn't there? When we pray, how often do we treat God like a genie in the lamp; hoping that God will grant our every wish, our every desire? Here we are in a relationship with Almighty God who has all power and all authority, and the temptation is always there, isn't it, to ask God to do things for us that we want God to do.

It isn't hard to feel for Simon Peter. We see him in the mirror. Not that there is anything wrong in praying for ourselves, of course; but we must always attend closely to our motivations and try our best to ensure that we are not being driven by selfish desires. And so Jesus arrives at Simon and Andrew's home and finds Simon's mother-in-law with a fever. She's sick. It can't be good. Fevers never are. It's why we wait with baited-breath when at the clinic and the nurse scans our forehead. Do we have a fever? If so, could it be COVID?

Yet the fear isn't the whole story. Simon's mother-in-law (*and I so wish she had a name*) was sick. Sickness meant that she was unclean. She shouldn't be visited, let alone touched. Disease was uncomfortable. It separated people. It pushed those who were sick to the margins. It didn't heal them. Instead, it shamed them. It associated their sickness, their disease, their illness, with immorality and sin. That any fever must have a moral cause. That any illness is of their own doing.

Illness. It was a death sentence.

As the scholar Ched Myers writes, "Disease and physical disability were an inseparable part of the cycle of poverty....For the day laborer illness meant unemployment and instant impoverishment.... Economic and political deterioration, especially in the decade prior to the upheavals of the Roman-Jewish war [A.D. 66-70, around the time Mark most likely was writing], had dispossessed significant portions of the Palestinian population, especially in the densely populated rural areas of Galilee..." The area where Jesus is at the beginning of Mark's gospel.

Healing in first century Palestine is not just about recovering from a cold. It is about returning to society.

When I was in middle school in the early nineties, my youth group took a mission trip to the big city of Portland Oregon. Growing up in a college town, not that different from Marquette, a couple of hours south of Portland, the city had allure. Yet that's

not why we went. We didn't go to sight see, to shop, or to go to the zoo or art museum. We went to volunteer at an AIDS hospice.

It was 1992. The year that AIDS was the leading killer of men age 25-44 in the United States. The movie, Philadelphia, hadn't been released yet, but the country, and the world, was still in the throw of a crisis. The disease is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus. A virus. A virus that spread rapidly through the gay community. A virus that then became an illness that our society associated with morality. Having AIDS meant homosexuality or drug use. Forget the fact that people got the virus through blood transfusions – I had a great uncle who died from it. It was seen as a moral disease. In the 80s, 90s, even today, we're not that different than those in early Palestine.

So we go to the AIDS hospice. It's house on a street, a beautiful old Victorian home. It smelled clean – like COVID disinfectant clean – and we were there to clean, paint, and meet the residents. What I remember most, is that it wasn't like a nursing home. It wasn't sterile in any industrial sense. It was clean, but it was a home. The men, it was mostly men, who lived there, were quiet and friendly. They were gracious to a bunch of early teens descending upon their home. They talked with us, sang with us at the piano, and shared a meal. They'd been marginalized, and there, in that home, they reclaimed some of their worth. They reclaimed their belovedness. They were able to be themselves and not a disease.

That's what they shared with us that day.

Not some feeling of accomplishment from cleaning baseboards or painting trim, but the value of having a place to be yourself. It's a message that resonated with me, struggling with body image and disability. I suspect it resonated well with all of us kids, adolescents, still trying to figure out who we were. It made sense.

The first healing story in Mark, aside from freeing a man from his demons, is returning an unnamed woman to her community. It is freeing another person from that which confines them and holds them from being how, and who, God created them.

Yes, the fever broke. God wants our bodies to be whole. But we can be healed beyond disease.

Every person I met that day in that old home in Laurelhurst has died from complications of a viral disease. Yet they were no longer ostracized and marginalized.

In that place, in that space, a community of volunteers and residents didn't let the disease become an illness.

We need healing stories. We need miracles. We need the power of prayer. And even more, we need the Jesus who comes to remind us that we're beloved. That we are more than a diagnosis, more than a disease, more than a disability. We need a savior who comes into our temples and tears down the stigma and shame. We need Jesus to reach out his hand and remind us that we're touchable and lovable – that we have worth.

Our story doesn't end in Simon's home, just like it didn't at the house in Portland that summer day. Jesus continues. After Jesus frees Peter's mother-in-law *from* illness, he frees crowds of people *from* disease and possession as well – he frees them from illness. He claims them as beloved children of God. In the midst of world where they are invisible, he sees them. In a world that says they are worthless, he reminds them of their worth.

Being human is to what God committed God's self to and therefore, being who we are is what God wants us to be. God brings us back from the brinks of our lives, from despair, from disease, from desperation, to live. Because then, maybe, we will actually know, feel, and get that *we* are a part, that God needs us to be a part, of what's at stake for God when God decided to become one of us.

Friends, Jesus will take you by the hand. God will raise you up. When you are brought back from the edge, from the brink, your question will be that of Simon's mother-in-law, "What am I doing here?" What will your answer be? "I am ____." That's who God wants me to be. This is who I am.

This is what Jesus' ministry looks like and what his disciples, and we, are called to. We are called to restoration. Restoring that which marginalizes. Whether that be race, age, gender, sexuality, ability, mental health, or anything else.

So get up. In Christ you are made whole. This is who God wants you to be.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.