

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 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 minister to them.

That evening at sundown, he 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; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

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 to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Have you ever been healed?

I mean, sick one moment and then not the next, Jesus-style healed? It's an unlikely question to ask these days. Especially in this place I imagine. We Presbyterian folks don't generally go for the whole miraculous "healing thing". It's often not very decent, nor is there much order involved.

Just look here in Mark's story, and we can see that this healing thing can get out of hand real quick. Jesus' outstretched hand to Simon's mother-in-law is not his first act of healing, but rather his second in this gospel.

His first having just taken place in the temple-
during the Sabbath-

and involving nothing short of an exorcism of an unclean spirit.

Way to keep a low profile there, Jesus.

And once he's opened the floodgates, there's no stopping the waters.

"The whole city was gathered around the door"- Jesus! Jesus! Over here! I imagine the impatience of a student, hand thrust in the air, waiting to be called on. Or the throngs of fans closing in for just even a glimpse of their favourite celebrity.

Have you ever been healed?

I wonder how Simon's mother-in-law would have answered that question before Jesus' arrival? I am sure that, much like today, there were many in Capernaum who claimed such power.

Drink this twice a day and those annoying body aches will disappear!

Swim in these pools and that pesky skin rash will be all but a distant memory!
Bring me the best of your livestock and say goodbye to a lifetime of debilitating paralysis!

Take this pill, eat this food, have this massage, send me money, offer a sacrifice, pray, pray, pray. Maybe early on she'd even believed some of their promises...that is until she grew used to life as it was and tired of consistent disappointment.

There is a reason that oftentimes we hear the gospel writers invoke the imagery of demons in these healing stories.

Ask someone on their first, or second, or third round of chemo;

 someone battling with addiction;

someone who sits with a family member or a friend in the same sterile hospital room day in and day out;

 someone who lives in exile; from their family or from their community.

 Ask them whether or not demons are a real.

And so when one comes who can and does, with his mere touch, break the grasp of such pain and sorrow no wonder he finds an instant following.

 Simon knows the struggle as well as anyone.

Which is why, without hesitation, after witnessing the events in the synagogue, he takes Jesus to her. Maybe he had an idea before.

 We have to believe that he felt that something was different about this man.

Why else would he and his brother have given up their livelihood, dropped their nets, and immediately followed if there wasn't some pull that came from beyond themselves.

 And so they asked and Jesus went with them, without hesitation.

Employing the same straightforwardness by which he called her son-in-law, Jesus reaches out his hand and physically lifts her up, restoring the ground beneath her feet. Though he's been at it for only a short while now, Jesus knows that this is the way to begin ministry with others.

 Not with challenging words or radical action,

though those will come later for Jesus, as they too have an important role in ministry.

Jesus understands that ministry begins fundamentally in relationship with others. In reaching out; extending a hand; meeting someone where they are. And in the end, what is more challenging, what is more radical than offering yourself in relationship to another person?

Especially those cast aside because of disease,

 or economic status,

 or gender,

 or cultural background,

 or lifestyle,

or any of a hundred other reasons why they don't quite fit the mold we've designed.

Which is just what Jesus does here. He offers his hand to a woman. A woman who has been sick. A woman he just met. A woman about whom he probably knows relatively little, and we know a lot less, except that she is the mother of Simon's wife. Jesus promises nothing, says nothing, but he merely reaches down and pulls her to her feet.

While serving my former congregation in Philadelphia, I met a man named Allen. Allen is a veteran of the war in Vietnam, and has been homeless off and on for many years. He continues to struggle with addiction and mental illness emphasized in no small part by the trauma of war, but nurtured in regular 12 step meetings and visits with a counselor. Rather small in stature, Allen would get lost amid the regular crowd of up to sixty men and some women who would appear each Saturday at the church for our weekly food

and clothing distribution. He's fairly soft-spoken, but once you get him going, he can talk your ear off!

Allen began to frequent the Cupboard about a year into my time at Old First, and I will admit that early on I didn't quite know what to make of him. I got to talking to him- for more than the few brief seconds on a hectic Saturday morning- when he began showing up during the week, loaded down with various bags and boxes. All donations he'd gathered for the Cupboard. Turns out Allen spent almost all his time at the Homeless Veterans Assistance Center just down the street, and whatever they had excess of or didn't need, he ferried over to us to give out on Saturday mornings. Big fleece jackets during the winter. Sleeping bags and blankets for nights spent outside. During our community prayers on Sunday mornings, Allen would always ask for a fishing rod. His request came again and again. So often that at one point someone bought him a fishing pole and brought it to church, excited to be able to fulfill his need. In fact what Allen was asking for was instead metaphorical. He took seriously the wisdom that says, "Give a person a fish, they'll eat for the night. Teach them to fish and they'll eat for a lifetime".

As I spent more time with Allen, I gleaned that his goal,
his mission
his ministry was to travel alongside others who'd had similar experiences
and to do his best to teach them to fish.

And by that I mean, Allen knows intimately the anxiety and sadness and fear and anger that many vets experience and that many of us don't quite understand. He doesn't attempt to direct or to chide or to heal; but knows that sometimes someone can encourage you to attend the morning meeting down the street; or let you know where meals are being served that day; or show you some nooks and crannies that keep you out of the rain. I imagine someone did this for Allen long ago, and he realized at some point that though he cannot tell someone what their next steps should be, he can travel alongside for a bit.

Those of you who've read your Link this week may recognize this quote, but it bears repeating. Heidi Neumark, a Lutheran pastor who wrote of her experience in ministry with a diverse and struggling congregation deep in heart of the Bronx, says this, "Connection is everything. Relationship to God and to each other is life itself".

Allen knows the importance of opening yourself to life-giving, life-sustaining relationship. It's what he extends each day at the Vet Assistance Center and on the streets to any who will take him up on his offer. This connection is what Jesus offers Simon's mother-in-law in the story, and what he continues to offer to the hoards who crowd the doorway. **And then on top of that** Jesus extends a hand of restoration and wholeness that none other than him can promise, because extended here is opportunity for life anew. Jesus' healing is more than *just* a renewal of the body, but for all intents and purposes a witness to the resurrection promise,
which is life lived in God
and for God

and to the glory of God.

Our wholeness is not complete within ourselves, but comes to fruition in relationship with God and one another. Jesus provides Simon's mother-in-law an opportunity to live this relationship anew.

I will stretch to say that this is healing that is not quite as suspect as that pitched to us from billboards and TV screens. And go even further to say this is healing that is needed **not only** in hospice rooms and at the bedside.

Because we read the papers,

and watch the evening news,

and listen to the radio enough to know that brokenness abounds-

in homes from Gaza to Shreveport;

in relationships from Washington DC to Kabul.

We know that healing is needed, just as well as we know that neither you nor I nor anyone here is Jesus.

In spite of that, though we are not fit for the awesome, Jesus-style healing; we do have in us the potential for a bit of the miraculous. I believe we take our cue from Simon's mother-in-law, who has learned quickly in her short encounter with Jesus.

Her first response is to serve, or rather to minister, to those right there in her home.

John Calvin reminds us that our response to the grace extended to us through Jesus Christ can only be gratitude. Gratitude for a gift we surely did not ask for and clearly did not earn. And this gratitude at opportunity for life anew is what she expresses through ministry to others. And there are others. Many others.

The hoards of those in desperate need of healing who crowd at her door.

Simon and Andrew, James and John who are taking a crash course in ministry with Jesus.

Jesus, who works late into the night- healing, caring for, reaching out to those for whom he was sent.

And those who came after- because I am sure that weeks after he left, they still crowded at her door to hear the stories.

I wonder of the effect of her ministering presence to all of these visitors, some sick, some well, some with newfound health, some still seeking healing.

Have you ever sat with someone who is sick? Paid regular visits to someone who is homebound? Had an ongoing dialogue with someone in need of the presence of another person? I believe that the effects can be miraculous. My grandfather lived life fully up until a month before his 102nd birthday. Now, he was in good health most of his life, he took care of himself, and he had great medical care in his later years. But I can't discount the importance of my parent's daily visits for the three years he lived in an assisted living home; his regular care-takers who would sit with him and minister to him each day; and the constant influx of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren who would arrange regular plane-travel to Dallas to be with him. Likewise, I won't discount the importance of Allen's relational ministry to those in our community in Philadelphia. By the time I left, he had several others with him at the side of the river ready to cast their lines. And I don't discount the ways that this congregation ministers to the needs of folks here and across this city. Even in my short time I have witnessed your care and concern for one another.

Being in relationship with others is not an easy ministry- to care for others whether family or friends or those we hardly know. We already see the wear on Jesus who escapes for even a brief moment before being hunted down by Simon and the others.

And hopefully ministry can grow within these relationships- affecting healing not only in individuals but in communities and institutions. Remember, Jesus' ministry moves from healing to asking questions to overturning tables. But know this, relationship with one another and with God is where our life together begins and ends. It is here that we receive the healing grace that Christ extends; and here where we begin our own ministry of healing, preaching, and teaching. Thanks be to God.

Amen.