

Today we continue in the book of Mark, still in chapter 1. As you may recall last week the Gospel setting was in the synagogue with Jesus teaching – a new teaching, with authority. And now, Jesus has moved from the religious, public setting of a synagogue to a private setting of a house. And, then verse 33 reads: “And the whole city was gathered around the door, and Jesus cured many who were sick.” Never mind Mark’s use of hyperbole when he says the whole city is at the door, but the point is made. Jesus’ ministry doesn’t end at the door. In fact his ministry takes him out into public, out into the towns and villages where the Gospel should be proclaimed. Then the next three stories after that are all about people society has deemed, outcasts. These spaces, this structure is intentional for Mark. It tells us that Jesus’ interest in people, (in their wellbeing, in their faith), is not put into a compartment; his interest is in their whole being, our whole being – the religious, the personal, the familial, the relational, and out through the door, to the multitudes, to the marginalized, to the forgotten. Mark structures his Gospel in a series of short stories, stories that told, separately or together, “offer the most beautiful invitation to the kingdom.” [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 1, p. 308]

Let me add another aside about Mark. I figure if we’re going to spend the year together with him, we oughta know as much as we can about his gospel. Mark lets us, the readers, inside, as if we’re sitting next to the narrator. We’re “in the know,” unlike the disciples who we will watch bumble around a bit. We’ll know by the end of the third chapter that Jesus is a marked man.

Mark dares you to keep up with his frenetic pace. We will watch his disciples tell no one about Jesus, and in the end, tell everyone about him. There’s no time for a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, or Jesus as a boy, or a loving father welcoming home his prodigal son. We’re going to want to linger, but there’s no time. Mark will keep us moving, especially up to that long walk, then colt ride, into Jerusalem. We already know Jesus is going to die. This man is really going to die, and die in the worst way – alone, forsaken by his enemies, by his friends and seemingly, even by God. No one seems to know but the reader, that, (spoiler alert), God will resurrect Jesus in three days. The women, who know about death, will head to the tomb to tend to the body. We know that Jesus won’t be there, but, at that moment, all they will know is the terror, of someone they love having been killed.

Much of this back story I gleaned from Markan scholars. Even though I took a class on this Gospel 35 years ago, what I’ve learned recently has been from more current New Testament scholars, most notably today, Gary Charles, Presbyterian pastor in Atlanta. [Lectionary Homiletics, Vol XVII, No. 2, p. 1]

So, meanwhile, or if you watch Stephen Colbert, “quarantine-while” back at the house, we meet Simon, who we’ll soon come to know as Peter; he is with his mother-in-law. Jesus and others had just left the synagogue, and now entered her house. “She was in bed with a fever. Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” The heart of the story can be told in this one verse, “Jesus lifted her, holding her hand, the fever left her, and she served them.” The Greek word for “lifted her” or “raised her” is from the root “to get up.” This is the same word Mark will use at the end of his Gospel, when Jesus was raised up from the dead. I don’t think that’s a coincidence. I don’t think anything is a coincidence with Mark. It’s theologically significant. Many healing stories throughout the Gospels end with Jesus pointing out their great faith has made them well or their sins have been forgiven. This is the first story in which, Jesus heals just because! Perhaps it’s even a Paschal

announcement or a foreshadowing, of Jesus' own death. How does she respond to being healed? She serves them. I must admit my knee jerk reaction when I hear that is to grumble why does she, having just been sick, have to get up and serve these able-bodied men. But that's not the point of this text. Now the fact that Mark didn't tell us her name may be sexist, but not her act of service. – service on the sabbath, by the way. Remember, they had just come from the synagogue. She turned the Sabbath day into a day of service to others. Jesus didn't ask her too; she did it on her own accord. As noted, "She is the one that assumes the initiative and awaits the consequences, discovering the value of mutual service above the sacredness of the Sabbath." [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 1, p. 334]

She is among them as one who serves, and becomes the first deacon in Jesus' mission and ministry. Most likely, Simon and the other disciples won't understand until the day of resurrection. They haven't grasped yet, that the Son of God came to serve, to give his life for all. But, you know, I think she does get it, enough, anyway, to get up and start serving. She can claim the name, diakonisa, Greek for a servant of the church.

As I reflect on this woman's healing and service to others, I can't help but think of our own call to service as well, in the church, in the home, beyond our doors to the multitudes, to the marginalized who need our care. My thoughts quickly turn to these last 11 months, almost a year of online worship and zoom meeting and re-imagining communion and baptism and ordination and Sunday School. But you know what else I've seen? Hundreds of pounds of food going to the Emergency Food Pantry; thousands of dollars going to help feed our friends in Kenya dealing with a drought as well as a pandemic. I've seen SUVs filled with clothing and winter gear heading north to our friends at Bdecan. I've seen teenagers writing letters to our members in retirement homes, members inviting other members to watch worship together. Members of the prayer chain praying, deacons making phone calls and running errands. I've seen "You Are Loved" yard signs all over town. I, along with other staff, have been on the receiving end of your generosity and thoughtfulness, of cups of coffee, doughnuts, chocolate, notes of appreciation and thanks. This is the community of faith in action and in service.

Gerald May was a medical doctor and theologian; he died a dozen or so years ago. Much of his career was spent on aspects of healing, particularly spiritual healing. He wrote:

"God's grace through community involves something far greater than other people's support and perspective. The power of grace is nowhere as brilliant nor as mystical as in communities of faith. Its power includes not just love that comes from people and through people but love that pours forth among people, as if through the very spaces between one person and the next. Just to be in such an atmosphere is to be bathed in healing power." [Ibid., p.336]

The staff and session, and others within our community of faith are discerning and discussing the right time for us to regather for public worship. We know that some other local churches are open, but we're charged with tending to the needs of this community. The opening statement of our Regathering recommendations reads: Because we love God we offer our best in our work and worship. Because we love our neighbors, we want to do everything we can in an effort to bring no harm to anyone when we regather."

I'm asking you to hang in there with us as we navigate through the murky waters of this last little bit until it's safe for all of us to return. We are so close. We can see the light.

Near the end of this lesson from Mark, “In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” In the coming weeks I ask for your prayers as we make decisions for this community of faith. I ask as well, that you pray for the millions of families throughout our world who have been touched deeply by this virus, for healthcare workers, suppliers of vaccines, teachers, other front line workers and decision makers.

May we all be bathed in God’s healing power. Amen.