

“The Authority to Heal”

Psalm 111, Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Mark 1:21-28

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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We are mortal. As a former treasurer at one of my previous churches was fond of saying, “None of us gets out alive.”

The late Dr. Howard Clinebell (1922-2005) was a United Methodist pastor, professor at the U.M. School of Theology at Claremont and a pastoral counselor whose 20 books influenced two generations of clergy, including your pastor. One thing he said was that the music playing in the background of our lives is the song of our own mortality. Most of the time, we can turn the music down or drown it out. But then Dottie Long dies. Or someone else dear to us dies, as our recent prayer intentions reflect has happened to a number of you. Then the reality of our mortality announces itself loudly.

Why begin with such morbidity? To speak of Jesus’ authority to heal does not spare us from the reality of death. Not the *finality* of death but the *reality* of death. We—Christians—believe that the finality of death was overcome in Jesus’ resurrection. Through it we are offered the promise of eternal life. Still, when a loved one dies we experience one of the greatest injuries from which we hope to heal.

Healing, as you know from many years of healing ministry in this church, is not the same as curing. In casual conversation we often use these words interchangeably but there is a distinction. “Cure” usually refers to the restoration of health or recovery from illness. While “heal” may be used in this way, it also means to be made whole or to be restored to our original purity or integrity. For this reason one can still be physically or emotionally ill, but healed, because one has come to wholeness by acceptance of the infirmity. Dottie Long was not cured of cancer but there is universal agreement by those who knew her that she was healed.

For people of faith that acceptance includes reliance on God. In the same way that we cannot ultimately be cured from dying, there are some illnesses or life losses from which we cannot be cured. But in the same way that our faith promises us healing from death even though we cannot be cured of it, there are illnesses, losses and set-backs from which we can be healed even though we may not be cured.

So let's look at Jesus' authority to heal beginning with Mark's Gospel. We enter the story just after Jesus called his first four disciples, the four fisherman, two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew and James and John. By the way, Sandy Morgan preached a fine message last week and if you were unable to be with us, copies are available in the back and on-line.

They go to Capernaum, enter the synagogue on the Sabbath day and Jesus taught. So far, so good. Capernaum was the regional center at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, less than 10 miles from where Jesus called those first disciples. A local rabbi entering the synagogue on the Sabbath? Of course! Teaching? Of course! But then the story gets interesting. Mark says "*They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*" (1:22) What did the scribes teach? They taught both oral and written tradition, handed down through many generations. While having merit, this teaching lacked the urgency of personal ownership, the power of personal persuasion, the particularity of personal experience. Jesus taught "*as one having authority.*" The Greek word for authority, "*exousia,*" means "*out of that which is one's very own.*" Jesus knew whereof he spoke. Whether our theology dictates that Jesus knew these things because they were foreordained, given to him by God to bring to earth; or whether they were knowledge born of the grind of human experience, as a poor Judean peasant family might have known, the text doesn't say. We may presume either or both. What is important is that Jesus' authority was authentic, out of the bowels of his own integrity.

Immediately Jesus' authority was challenged! While he's teaching a man shouts out "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*" It is interesting to me that the first person to recognize Jesus' divinity is one who had an "*unclean spirit*" and whom impolite society would call "crazy." Such things do happen. In one church I had a candidate for an organist's position leave the organ console and start lecturing incoherently to the congregation! It was what the doctor's called a "manic" episode. It was startling, alarming and ultimately defused by prayer and my speaking directly with the person in the moment. Episodes such as these are reminders that even in the recesses of a troubled mind there is a spark of divine that we must never take for granted or give up on.

In today's story Jesus clearly did not give up on the man. On the contrary, he saw the man as someone to be saved: "*Be silent, and come out of him!*" Jesus' authority was expressed even in the ability to command unclean spirits.

What is the good news for us today? Jesus is given the authority to heal. So we follow someone with great power! Many of us can tell stories of having been healed by this power. For some of us these are stories of curing, even miraculous curing involving the suspension of natural law as we understand it and contrary to medical prognosis. For others, our stories find healing power mediated through physicians, medical professionals, spiritual leaders, the love of family and friends and much prayer.

Larry Davies tells the story of Berenice and her mother, also named Berenice, in an on-line article "A miracle of hope in the midst of strife." (www.homileticsonline.com, August 7, 2002) Berenice the mother was diagnosed with both cancer and dementia and, over a 12 month period, became more ill from the cancer and more suspicious, moody and frustrated from the dementia. It wasn't easy for daughter Berenice and she would occasionally retreat to the church to pray, think and cry.

Just when she thought it couldn't get worse, her mother had a stroke. By now she recognized no one and occasional conversations could be charitably described as incoherent ramblings. But she was also waving her arms more and at times looked like she was holding an imaginary pen and attempting to write something. No one thought anything of it but an alert nurse noticed and suggested that Berenice put a pen in her mother's hand and a sheet of paper underneath.

"I thought it was silly," Berenice told Larry Davies later, but she reluctantly followed the nurse's instructions. Berenice's mother paused for a moment and then she began to slowly and deliberately write three extraordinary words: "I love you." Four days later she died.

In one special moment, Berenice's two year long struggle was made worthwhile by a miracle of love. She was not cured but clearly she was healed.

For followers of the Great Physician, we have an assurance that Jesus does not give up on us in our time of need. As he used his authority to heal long ago, so he does today. That healing sometimes involves confrontation of the illness of mind and spirit as well as the illness of body. And whether we are cured or not, we know this Great Physician exercises his authority because he **lived** his authority, even to death on a cross, where he forgives enemies, offers paradise to a criminal, and vanquishes death forever. May our opening hymn be our prayer of trust: "*Heal us, heal us today.*" Amen.