

“The Power to Heal”

Psalm 147:1-6; Isaiah 40:21-31; I Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39

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We’ve all been sick. So we all know the urgent feeling of wanting to get better. Perhaps the degree of urgency varies depending on the severity and length of the illness, but these basic sentiments in the form of questions are shared by people who are sick: “How can this happen to me?” “What will it take to get better?” “Will I get better, and when?”

There is an urgency here that is not only typical of our desire to get well, but is typical of Mark’s Gospel on which this message is based. Of course, the rationale is different. Mark tells us about his urgency in the very first verse of his Gospel: *“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* Mark’s urgency comes from a desire to proclaim good news. Since most of the Gospel readings from now until December are in Mark, it is worth understanding this aspect of his writing. He is concise. His tone is “hurry up, time’s a-wasting.” Mark is sometimes called the “immediate” Gospel because of his frequent use of the word “immediately.”

Since the bad weather has adversely affected worship attendance these last two weeks, let me recall where we are in the story. Two weeks ago Jesus called his first four disciples, and Sandy Morgan delivered a wonderful message on *our* need to respond to Jesus’ call to us as disciples. Last week these same disciples, two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, went with Jesus to the synagogue. There Jesus—filled with the spirit of God in the house of God—demonstrated a new teaching as one having divine authority. He commanded an unclean spirit to come out of a sick person, and the person was healed.

That brings us to today’s story. Note its urgency: **As soon as they left the synagogue** they go to the home of Peter’s mother-in-

law and tell Jesus **at once** that she is sick. **That evening** more sick people are brought to Jesus. **In the morning, before daylight**, Jesus goes to pray. His companions **hunted for him** and said, ***“Everyone is searching for you.”*** Jesus 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.”*** All of this in 11 verses!

So with urgency the Gospel tells of Jesus’ power to heal, a power that touched the disciples’ own families and that was so authentic that crowds came to him wherever he went.

Does Jesus heal today? Yes. As I said last week, “heal” and “cure” are different. “Cure” is to have health restored. Sometimes that happens, sometimes it doesn’t. But to be “healed” is to be made whole. Being whole can happen through the restoration of health, but it can also happen through the acceptance of our infirmity and being open to God’s spirit in all circumstances.

So what is the source of “the power to heal” and how can we access it? The first source is faith. Throughout the New Testament, faith—trust in Jesus and God’s power through him—is essential to the effectiveness of Jesus’ healing ministry. Sometimes that faith is from the person who is ill. Sometimes it is the faith of someone close to the ill person, as in those who brought the paralytic in Mark 2 and as we sang last week:

***“A paralyzed man was let down through a roof. Heal us, heal us today!
His sins were forgiven, his walking the proof. Heal us, Lord Jesus!***

Without faith, healing is nearly impossible. Mark later (6:5) tells us that Jesus “could do no deed of power” in his hometown because of the people’s unbelief. He could only “cure” a few sick people but not “heal” them.

The faith in today’s story is implied but evident. The disciples told Jesus about Peter’s mother-in-law **at once**—there’s that urgency again—because they had faith he could help her. I’ll side-step the opportunity for a mother-in-law joke to avoid

alienating half the congregation; and because I hope my lovely wife will one day be a mother-in-law; and because I love my own mother-in-law and she—to the surprise of some—loves me. Yet one does wonder... *“Unclean spirits, huh? That’s nothing. Let’s take him to Peter’s mother-in-law. If he can heal her, he can heal anybody!”* Or were they just looking for supper since the story reports that she got up and served them in vs. 31.

As to faith and it’s link to healing: Barbara Porter tells the story of Dr. Christina Puchalski in an article entitled “Spirituality and Health” (www.homileticsonline.com). Dr. Puchalski gained respect for spirituality from her parents who escaped from Poland in World War II. She grew up hearing stories of how they coped with the horrors of war by turning to faith. Trained as a clinician and biochemical researcher, she volunteered with the Maryland State Health Association and saw firsthand how patients integrated spirituality into their lives to deal with mental illness. Her real turning point came when her fiancé died of cancer. In the aftermath of his death and during her involvement with support groups, she came to realize the vital link between spirituality and medicine. In 2001 she acted on her faith to found the George Washington Institute for Spirituality and Health, part of the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences. (<http://smhs.gwu.edu>) So the first source of healing is faith.

The second source is prayer. Jesus was vitally connected with God through prayer. In today’s story, Mark tells us that having spent the entire day with people, curing the sick, casting out demons, Jesus rises early the next morning to re-energize his relationship with God through prayer.

We do not know the exact words of this prayer but we know that the Gospels offer many wonderful examples of Jesus’ prayers. When the disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray” Jesus taught them “The Lord’s Prayer.” In John 17 Jesus offers a powerful intercessory prayer of love for his disciples. Later in

Mark (14:36) he prays to be spared from death while trusting in God: *“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want.”*

Not all of our prayers are so mature. Homer Simpson is a cartoon character parent who is narcissistic and immature. He discovers what he believes to be the power of prayer for every little request, like finding the TV remote. Since it works, he keeps going. His wife Marge warns him that he cannot treat God like a heavenly concierge. His response: “Can and will.” One wit has called this style of prayer “SOS” – “solve our situation” – which means *“Dear God, if you give me an ‘A’ on this exam I promise to do my homework from now on.”*

We can do better. In times of faltering faith, one of my favorite prayers in the Bible is the prayer of the man who, also in this Gospel, asked healing for his son: *“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”* (9:24) Our prayer life is ideally patterned after Jesus, who engages to serve and then detaches to pray, and is regular and persistent in the discipline of prayer, a discipline strengthened through regular exercise. Or as a bumper sticker says simply: Prayer: don’t give God instructions, just report for duty.

The poet Grace L. Naessens expresses it this way:

*I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day
I had so much to accomplish that I didn’t have time to pray.
Problems just tumbled about me and heavier came each task.
“Why doesn’t God help me?” I wondered. He answered “You didn’t ask.”
I wanted to see joy and beauty but the day toiled on gray and bleak.
I wondered why God didn’t show me; He said, “But you didn’t seek.”
I tried to come into God’s presence; I used all my keys at the lock;
God gently and lovingly chided, “My child you didn’t knock.”
I woke up early this morning and paused before entering the day;
I had so much to accomplish that I had to take time to pray.*

May vital prayer and living faith enable us to experience Jesus’ power to heal. Amen.