

Sermon—“Why Healing Alone Isn’t Enough”

2/7/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When Jesus awoke that morning, he was exhausted. You see, the previous day had begun like many others, with him going to the local synagogue to teach. But while he was there, a man possessed by an unclean spirit had approached him and started taunting him, saying, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” In response, Jesus commanded the spirit to “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the spirit listened. Amidst the man’s convulsing and crying out, the spirit departed, amazing everyone who was present. Almost immediately, word began to spread throughout the city and region of what Jesus had done. Meanwhile, as we heard in today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus was entering the home of two of his earliest disciples, Simon and Andrew. And as he would soon find out, that day there would be little to no rest for the weary.

Upon entering their home, we are told, Simon came to Jesus. “Lord, I’ve just been told that my mother-in-law is in bed with a fever.” During those days, fevers were no minor ordeal. They often pointed towards something more, towards darker days that lay ahead in the future. So we can imagine the pain and anguish in Simon’s voice as he spoke with Jesus. Pain and anguish that I’m guessing we’ve all shared when praying for a loved one. “Lord, if there’s anything that you can do for her, please. Help her, heal her, I’m begging you. I’ll do anything; just make the fever go away.” Well, after listening intently, Jesus went and took Simon’s mother-in-law by the hand. No sooner did he lift her up than the fever miraculously disappeared. Based on what happened next, it sounds as if news of her healing spread quickly as well.

That evening, at sunset—sunset because it marked the end of the Sabbath—, a large crowd began to gather outside the house. Amidst the crowd were people who were sick and possessed; people who had heard of Jesus’ miracles and come to experience healing of their own. Others were there to see what this so-called Messiah would do next, to pass the time after long, tiring days of their own. People were there for a variety of reasons and the crowd eventually grew so large that it felt like all of Capernaum was there, somewhere around 1,500 people. And Jesus did not disappoint. Late into the night he cured people who were sick and cast out demons. He worked tirelessly, performing miracle after miracle. Finally, with people still waiting to be healed, he had to stop for the night. He was so exhausted that he could not go on. So he went inside Simon’s house and promptly fell asleep, the events of the past day still swirling in his mind.

No wonder Jesus was still tired when he woke up early the next morning. Just imagine how many people he had healed. Imagine all the people who had been crippled who could now stand up straight and tall, who had been covered in sores who were now clean and whole, and who had been sick and dying who were now healthy and strong. He had healed so many people. And yet, there were still so many more people who needed his help. As Jesus lay there, I imagine all he could think about was the crowd that would soon show up outside, some in search of a miracle and others for a show. He needed time to pray, time to seek guidance and to prepare himself for what lay ahead. So he quietly got out of bed while it was still dark and slipped out the door, off to the wilderness where he could be alone with God.

If I were Jesus, the wilderness would not have been my first choice. After all, Mark tells us that Jesus had barely emerged out of the wilderness. It is the wilderness where Jesus been driven by the Spirit and tempted by the devil over forty days and forty nights. Tempted, among

other things, to turn stones into bread and satisfy his daily needs. Healing was such an obvious need, a daily need. If Jesus had wanted, he could have spent the rest of his days healing others and never run out of opportunity. But here's the thing about healing, something that I'm guessing Jesus realized while praying there that day. Healing is temporary. The people that he had healed got well, only to eventually get sick again. All of us will one day surrender to our mortality. If Jesus were here, he could heal us time and time again and our fate would not change. Yes, the healings he performed that day brought joy, amazement, and gratitude, they enabled people to go and do things they never could have otherwise. Surely that is a reason to praise God. But Jesus realized that his ministry was meant to be about more than just healing and casting out demons.

When I first read today's Gospel lesson, my initial assumption was that Jesus went into the wilderness because he was exhausted. That he needed time to recharge his batteries and that prayer was the way in which he did that, just like it should be for us. Except, today's Old Testament lesson tells us that the Lord "does not faint or grow weary," but "gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless." And even if Jesus was exhausted, and I'm guessing that he was, being tired does not explain his response. That morning, after waking up and realizing that Jesus was gone, Simon and several others had been frantically searching for him. They had no idea where Jesus was or when he would return, assuming he ever would. Furthermore, with each passing minute, more and more people were gathering outside the house, waiting for Jesus to appear and start performing miracles. If Jesus had simply been exhausted, his response, at least in my mind, should have been to follow Simon and his companions back to Capernaum. After all, there were still plenty of people there who needed healing and demons that needed casting out. And Jesus now had the energy to do so. But Jesus had a different plan.

“Rather than return,” Jesus tells them, “let’s go on to the neighboring towns. True, God has given me the power to heal people and cast out demons, and I will continue to do so. God did not send me, though, simply to perform these miracles. The primary reason why I was sent was to proclaim the good news; to offer people not just temporary healing but eternal salvation. Who of you are willing to go with me? Who of you will help me as I seek to fulfill this mission?”

That was the question that Jesus was asking Simon and his companions. Jesus is asking us that same question today. Jesus is asking who among us is willing to follow Jesus and help him spread the good news. Answering that question is difficult in the best of times, when our church building is open and we can share God’s love with everyone we meet. Now, it in many ways seems nearly impossible. How can we be expected to follow this call when we’re not supposed to be around our friends and extended family, let alone co-workers and strangers? Any other year, today—Super Bowl Sunday—would be an opportunity to come together, to share food and conversation, to meet new people and renew old friendships. We could tell those around us about what’s been going on in our lives and where we were that morning, hopefully worshipping God in our beautiful sanctuary. But this year none of that will happen, and it may be tempting to conclude that because things are different the ordinary rules no longer apply. That God is giving us a break from our call, a chance to recharge our batteries, so that when the present pandemic is over we can come back renewed and ready to go. Except, we must remember that while Jesus did emerge from the wilderness renewed, he did not return to exactly where and what he had been doing before.

This and every day, we’ve been called to spread the good news and help bring healing to this world. We’ve been called to live like Jesus, so that through our lives and our ministry God might restore people’s bodies and souls, hearts and minds, and memories and relationships. Such

a calling cannot be taken lightly and will sometimes lead us to feel overwhelmed and exhausted. I know that I am right now, and given all that's happened over the past year, my guess is that many of you are as well. That is what we have been called to do, in both new and old ways. And so my hope and prayer for us on this day is that, when it begins to feel like too much, we will all follow Jesus' example and turn to God in prayer, and that when we do hear God's response, we will be like Jesus, Simon, and the other disciples that day. We will be willing to go where God is leading us and to do what God is calling us to do, to help bring healing and salvation; healing and salvation, not just here but everywhere. Amen.