

ETERNAL HEALING

Mark 1:29-39

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series B)

February 4, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 1, verses 29 through 39. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 1, beginning at verse 29, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁹ And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. ³¹ And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³² That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered together at the door. ³⁴ And he healed 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.

³⁵ And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, ³⁷ and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." ³⁸ And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." ³⁹ And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to heal you forever. His great mission is not to make this life better. His good and gracious will is not to protect us from illness, heal us of cancer, or comfort our achy joints. These things are all too small. God may grant us protection, healing, and relief. And if God does this, it will be for Jesus' sake. But we have no promise of these things. In some ways, Jesus does make this life better. But Jesus set his sights higher. He came to heal you forever.

Jesus has power to heal. He has authority over demons (1:25:26), fevers (1:31), leprosy (1:42), paralysis (2:11-12), storms (4:39), and even death (5:41-42). We see him exercising all this power in the first few chapters of Mark. He heals many people of various diseases. He casts out demons. He tells a storm to be quiet. He even raises a girl from death. It was marvelous, gracious, and compassionate. But it's not really why Jesus came. Jesus says that he came to do something else, and it might strike us as kind of strange.

Sometimes we can get a little bit of "miracle envy" when we read the Bible. We read about all these miracles of compassion, and we wish we had that. We get sick, or our children get sick. How great would it be if we could just bring them to Jesus? All he would have to do is say the word or reach out and touch them. Sometimes there are those afflictions that just don't go away. Even with our advanced medicine, there are still afflictions that linger for years and years, maybe for the rest of our lives. We try this or that, hoping that something will work, but, sometimes,

nothing does. How great would it be if we could just go to Jesus, and instead of managing our symptoms, he could heal the affliction?

There was a short period of time when you could actually do that. For a few years of Jesus' life on earth, he travelled around Israel, mostly in Galilee, the northern region of Israel, preaching and healing. When he came around to your town, you could go and get healed. You could cut a hole in his roof and lower your friend down. You could grab his cloak as he walked by. You could cry to him as he passed by on the road. For a few short years, there was healing on demand in Galilee. How great that must have been!

It all started in the city of Capernaum. That was Jesus' hometown as an adult. It wasn't too far from Nazareth, where he grew up. Nazareth was back in the hills, about ten or fifteen miles, while Capernaum was right on the Sea of Galilee. It's where Jesus called his first disciples, Simon, Andrew, James, and John. We read about that two weeks ago. Remember, they were fishermen. And it's where he started his public ministry. Last week, the sermon wasn't on this, but we read about Jesus preaching in the synagogue there and how he forced an unclean spirit out of a man with just his words.

Today's reading comes immediately after that, the very same day. Jesus goes to the house of Simon, who is also called Peter, and his brother Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was there, and she was sick with a fever. So they told Jesus about her. It seems like this was rather serious. She was bedridden, and they didn't have modern medicine. A fever could mean you were dying. But Jesus "took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them" (1:31). We might wonder why Mark would tell us the part about her immediately serving them. Did Jesus and his disciples need some sandwiches? No. The point is the immediacy of her healing. When people recover naturally, there's a gradual process. You don't go from bedridden to instantly performing your ordinary tasks. Your body fights off the illness, and then you start to regain your strength. But Simon's mother-in-law was instantly healed. The infection that had been streaming through her body was instantly gone, and her cells were immediately revived with strength. Jesus "took her by the hand and lifted her up, and she began to serve them."

The method Jesus uses to heal people often teaches something. He doesn't heal people the same way every time. Last week he healed a man with an unclean spirit by commanding the spirit to come out. This revealed Jesus' authority and the power of his words. And he does this a lot. But he uses a different method with Simon's mother-in-law. He doesn't say, "I command your body temperature to become 98.6 degrees." He could have, but he wants to teach something else. So he touches her. He takes her by the hand. This is more personal, more intimate. It reveals Jesus' compassion. He's not afraid to touch sick people. He's not even afraid to touch unclean people. In the passage immediately after this, Jesus even touches a leper. That was a huge no-no. People in those days were very afraid of catching leprosy, and touching a leper would make you ceremonially unclean. But Jesus touches sick people. This reveals his compassion. And it shows just how close God has come to us. Jesus comes and touches human sickness.

He comes and shares what we've got. God comes and touches humanity. He's not afraid to touch our sin and uncleanness. He comes, knowing full well that he will get what we have. That's actually the point. And I'm not talking about a virus, or whatever infection Simon's mother-in-law had. Jesus intends to catch our sin. For him it means death, but for us it means healing. The touch means that he shares our reality, and we share his.

Christianity is a very physical religion. It's a material religion. Not materialistic, but material. Physical stuff matters. God created a physical world. And Jesus came in physical flesh to redeem our physical flesh. And this is part of why it's so significant that Jesus is bodily present in the Lord's Supper. He comes to us and joins himself to us physically. Our bodies matter.

And so the manner in which Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law teaches something. It reveals Jesus' compassion and solidarity with us. He joins himself with us physically.

So Jesus performed two miracles that day. The first was at the synagogue, where Jesus released a man from an unclean spirit. And the second was at Simon's house, where he healed Simon's mother-in-law.

Apparently word got out around town, because at sundown, the people of Capernaum "brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons" (1:32).

They came at sundown because it was the Sabbath day. God commanded the people of Israel not to work on the Sabbath day (Ex. 20:8-9). And they marked days from sundown to sundown. So sundown on the Sabbath day marked the beginning of the first day of the week. So if you had work that you really wanted to do on the Sabbath day, you would just wait until evening.

Now God did not strictly define what did or did not count as work. So the Jews tied themselves in knots trying to determine what was or was not lawful. But if God intended the Sabbath to be a test or a burdensome command, he would have given them all sorts of regulations. But he didn't. The Sabbath is a gift, not a burden. It's rest, not a test. And Jesus would later teach that it is lawful to do good and to save life on the Sabbath (3:4). But the Jews had developed strict and minute criteria for what classified as work. You could not carry anything outside of your house, and there were limits on how far you could walk. These were not God's rules. But bringing the sick and demon-oppressed would have violated Jewish law. It would have been too much "work."

So when Mark says that they all came at sundown, it means they came the first chance they had. And it wasn't just the sick and demon-oppressed, but "the whole city" (1:33). People wanted to see the show.

But Jesus didn't seem to appreciate this. He didn't turn anyone away. He healed many people of many different diseases, and he cast out many demons. It makes one wonder just how common demon oppression was. But he didn't want to stay in Capernaum anymore. He snuck out of the house "early in the morning, while it was still dark." He went away to pray by himself (1:35). Simon and the others eventually found him, because everyone was looking for him. The show last night wasn't enough. They wanted more. But Jesus wasn't interested.

This is kind of strange. It seemed like Jesus had the start of something good going in Capernaum. And this happens a few other times with Jesus, where people get excited about him, but it's not the kind of excitement he wants. They get excited about his ability to heal the sick or multiply loaves of bread and fish. At one point the people were about to take Jesus by force in order to make him king, so he withdrew again by himself (John 6:15). It's not that Jesus doesn't want to heal people. And it's not that he doesn't want to be king. But he did not come to do that kind of healing, and he is not that kind of king.

So when Simon and the others find him, he says, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out" (1:38). Jesus came to preach. That's the first thing he did in Capernaum. Then it turned into a miracle show, and he left. And he goes to the other towns in Galilee in order to preach. He ended up casting out demons in those towns too, but the purpose of the trip, he says, is to preach. Jesus came to preach. The overarching purpose of

Jesus' life was to die and rise again. That's the big picture. But if we look more specifically at his public ministry—the three years or so before his crucifixion—the purpose of that public ministry was preaching. And this actually fits nicely into the overarching purpose of Jesus to die and rise again. He preaches so that people will believe in him, not just as a miracle worker, but as the Savior. The main purpose of his public ministry was preaching.

This might strike us as kind of strange. Talk is cheap ... and healthcare is expensive. If I said to you that next week we're going to heal all the sick and injured ... well, there might be a few more people here, but if we prove we can actually do it, there will be a lot more people here the following week. But if I said that next week we're going to have a sermon about Jesus forgiving your sins, there will be about as many people here as there are now, because we do that every Sunday.

So perhaps we need to reconsider what's really important. What did Jesus consider to be essential? Preaching or healing? Preaching. It wasn't even both. It was preaching. And the reason is this: Jesus came to heal us forever.

Sure, Jesus could heal people instantly. He could even raise the dead. But everyone got sick again. Everyone eventually died. And when an unclean spirit left a person, it might come back again with seven more (Matt. 12:45; Luke 11:26). What would happen if Jesus just set up a permanent healing shop in Capernaum? The people would have healing on demand. Nobody would be sick or dead longer than however long it takes to get to Jesus. But their bodies are still corrupted by sin. That is, they're still dying. So eventually the diseases a person has would just accumulate faster and faster as they get older, and Jesus would be healing and raising the same people over and over. And all of this would be going on while they still live in bondage to sin. Jesus did not come to heal a few people over and over again. He came to heal all who believe in him once and for all time. And that's why he preaches. He preaches to heal people in body and soul for all eternity.

He does this by preaching about himself. He preached, **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel”** (1:15). The time long ago spoken of by the prophets had come to pass. The Kingdom of God had come to earth in Jesus' own flesh. Jesus preached about himself, so that people would believe in him and be healed for all eternity. The miracles, then, end up serving as really awesome sermon illustrations. Yes, of course, they were works of mercy. But the greater significance of the miracles is that they were physical manifestations of the Kingdom of God on earth. They were the proof of what Jesus preached. So once he preached and performed a few miracles in one town, he would go on to the next, so that he could preach there also and heal souls for eternity. And some of these miracles are recorded for us, along with the names of eyewitnesses, so that we also might believe and have life (John 20:30-31).

Our bodies are decaying. We often hear our elders say that getting old stinks. It's a cliché, because it's very obviously true. And we can see it. I'm just a little bit old, and I'm starting to feel it. Some of you would say that I'm not old at all. Youth think I'm old and boring. So I'm pretty sure I'm somewhere in the middle. And I'm feeling some of it.

When we're young, we don't give much thought to getting older. We don't think about how painful it's going to be. And since we don't experience that pain when we're young, we don't think much of death. That's one of the many reasons I'm glad we have old people and young people together in our church. When we're young, we need to be reminded that our lives are on a trajectory toward death, and we need to be ready for it. We fall in love with this world, but this

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world is passing away. Train yourself, even when you are young, to look forward to the world to come.

Jesus came to heal you forever. It might be nice if he protected us from illness, healed us of cancer, and comforted our achy joints. That would be nice. But these things are too small. He may do these things. But Jesus set his sights higher. He came to heal you forever. That's what his preaching was about, and that is especially what his death and resurrection was about.

He touches our corruption. "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows ... And with his wounds we are healed" (Is. 53:4-5). Jesus came to heal you forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.