

Message for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B (2/7/2021)
Mark 1:29-39

This is not a story about healing. It's a healing story, of course, but in the end, it's not about healing per se. Hear me out.

Imagine for a moment that Jesus had agreed to return to Capernaum that second day to continue curing diseases and exorcising demons. "Everyone is searching for you," the disciples inform him, breathless from their own search. And there's a hint of reproach in their statement. As one interpreter remarks, the disciples know what Jesus should be doing, "and it is *not* sitting in solitude and prayer."¹ Imagine that Jesus had acquiesced to their insistence that he go back to the crowd clamoring for help.

I'm sure he could have met more needs, relieved more burdens, and earned a great deal more admiration from the people of Capernaum. He probably could have settled there permanently to become the local holy man, a pillar of the community, a hometown legend. But, Jesus declines to go back. "Let us go on to the neighboring towns," he says to the disciples, "so that I may proclaim the message there also...."

It's not for lack of compassion that Jesus moves on from Capernaum. No, he radiates God's own compassion throughout the Gospel, consistently looking with love on the people he encounters, and especially people in need.² **Healing is a**

¹ Gary W. Charles, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 337.

² E.g. Mark 6:34, 8:2.

function of that love; it's a manifestation of God's reign come near, a sign that Jesus' proclamation is truly good news. In the case of Simon's mother-in-law, healing also carries a paschal connotation – Jesus “lifts her up” from her illness, that is, he raises her to new life. It's a little Easter.

But, Jesus' legitimacy can't depend entirely on his ministry of healing. If it did, he'd be a disappointment. Think of all the residents of Capernaum who need healing, but who miss the healer by a single day. What happens to them? Think of all the afflicted in Jesus' time who simply don't have the privilege of crossing paths with him in Galilee. Think of the countless people in every generation who pray earnestly for a cure for themselves or a loved one, yet who don't get the result they so desperately want? If physical healing is the litmus test for Jesus' credibility, then he comes up short.

In light of God's promise to love and care for the world, the question of illness and healing remains a mystery. Still, we confess Jesus as the chief agent of God's reign on Earth as in heaven. What, then, are we to make of his decision to leave the people of Capernaum behind?

Could it be that this is a story for people pleasers? Put yourself in Jesus' shoes: There are scores of people in need a short distance away, and you have the power to change their lives. Despite your plans to move on, the people in your inner circle urge you to go back. Would you be able to say no? If you did, what

would your disciples think of you? What would the people of Capernaum think of you? What would everyone who hears this story in Mark's Gospel think of you?

For people pleasers, this is an uncomfortable exercise. Of course, we'd want to go back and continue healing people; that way we'd know they appreciate us. When our feelings of security and self-confidence depend on external validation, the temptation is always to say yes to others' needs and wants. And, who doesn't like to be liked? But, while people pleasing gratifies an immediate desire for acceptance, it also carries a long-term risk. **If our motivation at every turn is to win the approval of others, then we're likely to lose sight of our deepest gifts and callings; saying yes to everything might mean sacrificing the most important things.**

"How much of your life do you give over to the crowd?" That's the way one writer poses the critical question to people pleasers,³ the same question that's at the core of our Gospel today. This healing story at the beginning of Mark isn't about healing; rather, it's about Jesus' sense of identity and purpose. "Let us go on to the neighboring towns," he insists, "so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." **Jesus' vocation is to stretch the borders of God's reign, to extend the good news of God's love and justice beyond any particular context. And, his followers are those who are on the way with him in every age. Since the beginning, this movement has been a vanguard**

³ Michele Koh Morollo, "Stepping On Stage: The ugly truth about people pleasing," medium.com/swlh/stepping-on-stage-the-ugly-truth-about-people-pleasing-527b94ba7b2f.

of hope, reaching from one time and place to the next, refusing to be restricted.

That's why Jesus can't stay in Capernaum. And, that's why he can't become known only, or even primarily, as a healer, even if that's what his disciples want from him. **He hasn't come to "win the adulation of the crowds [by] working miracles,"⁴ but to be the Holy One of God for the life of the world. And, it's this sense of identity and purpose that guides his way forward, come what may.** Of course, Jesus' commitment to the reign of God comes at great personal cost. The crowds that once cheered him eventually turn on him, his disciples abandon him, and he finds himself utterly alone.

It's a people pleaser's nightmare. But, Jesus' way of love and justice is God's dream for our life together. Friends, you're part of that dream, too. You can't please everyone all the time, so it's fruitless to try. And in any case, your worthiness doesn't depend on what other people think of you. **You are God's beloved, you are gifted, and you are called to a life of purpose.** That doesn't mean that the choices you face will be easy or that you'll escape suffering. It does mean that you can let go of the person others expect you to be and live fully as the person God has made you to be for the sake of the world God loves.

⁴ Pheme Perkins, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 543.