

**FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY**  
**February 8, 2009 B**

**Mark 1:29-39**

*I need to say that while I was sitting at the computer in our home, preparing this sermon, our pet, a black lab named Toccoa who adopted us some years ago while she was an abandoned puppy in the north Georgia mountains, came up to me and nudged me as she often does when she wants some care and/or food. I didn't know then, after taking the time to give her some supper, that she would go on to her heavenly home before I had time to give this sermon, for she had a massive 'stroke' in the early hours of Sunday morning. We gathered together as a family to say a prayer and bid her good-bye, grateful for the gift of her companionship through the years she's been our pet – one of God's creatures through whom the power of God's unconditional love and healing has touched us deeply. And we are grateful to Dr. Jones and the staff at the Pet Emergency Clinic of Pitt County for their healing presence, "that heals the wounds of time."*

For many years now, I've had in my possession a fascinating book of photos and essays entitled: *The Power to Heal*. The authors wanted to show "through visual images and word pictures, the compassion and humanity that transcend – and link – all varieties of medicine and healing." It's an intriguing book dedicated "to the men and women around the world, who, in large measure and small, give of themselves to healing others." As one of the authors, Philip Moffit, states in the opening pages, "*The Power to Heal*" captures time and again the beautiful and mysterious power that one human being can have on another through the mere act of caring" – and it is the intention of the authors to communicate through this book this 'great truth' – and it is "that the act of caring is the first true step in the power to heal."

It's what Mark does right in the very first chapter of his account of the Good News of Jesus. As Ann mentioned in last week's sermon, "in Mark, Jesus' role as healer is magnified." Right at the beginning of his gospel, Mark tells us that healing was a key ingredient of Jesus' ministry. In last Sunday's text, Jesus is in the synagogue when a man possessed by a demon enters into the sacred space, perhaps knowing his need for healing because something probably just didn't feel right – and the unclean spirit within him begins shrieking, (I suspect, right in the middle of the sermon)! Jesus quickly responds by telling the demon to be quiet, "Come out of the man." And the demon listens to Jesus' command.

And immediately, upon leaving the synagogue (where our lesson starts today), instead of going to the Jewish Deli for lunch, the two brothers, Simon (as in Peter) and Andrew, invite Jesus, along with James and John, to come to their home. There's no free lunch for Jesus! Mark says that the first thing they do when Jesus enters their home is to tell him about Simon's mother-in-law. And

Mark doesn't waste a moment in sharing in as few words as possible that Jesus healed her. Now it doesn't matter whether or not she was in bed with the flu or with something more serious. For all we know, she may have needed some bed rest and lots of fluids to be better in a few days, but it didn't matter. Mark wants to show the healing power of Jesus which comes through the act of caring. Jesus visits her at her bedside. He takes her by the hand, that is, he touches her. And he lifts her up. Curiously, the Greek verb Mark uses to say Jesus 'lifts her up' (*geiren*) is the same word Mark uses to describe Jesus' resurrection. The miracles of healing in Mark are not simply done as acts of random kindness or mercy. The healing miracles of Jesus carry a message that suffering is not what God wills for people. God doesn't take pleasure in the suffering of humanity or in the pain that people inflict on one another, whether it be person to person, tribe to tribe or nation to nation. No, Jesus came to express God's power to heal and to restore humanity to wholeness and wellness of spirit, if not of body.

A new life had been given to Simon's mother-in-law, but not for her only. Lest we think that Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law because she was the only one who could get the lox and bagels prepared for Simon and his companions, perhaps it's Mark's intention, right from the start of Jesus' ministry of healing, to show that when we've experienced healing, we've got a responsibility to use our strength and spirit in service to others.

Jesus doesn't answer the question "why"? Why do people suffer? Why are people afflicted with illness and disease? Why are people possessed by demons? Rather, he has empathy and compassion for all. He knew what it was like to be with people he loved who were hurting or in pain. He lived at a time when his country was occupied by foreign forces - and saw people suffer unjustly. He knew the consequences of armed conflict. And it was for the purpose of lessening human burdens and suffering that he went about preaching that the kingdom of God had come - and he demonstrated that it had indeed arrived through God's power at work through his healing and driving out demons. It's why he needed his own time and space to find the deserted places where he opened himself in prayer to the Father. It's what we need to do as well, if like Jesus, we are to experience God's healing power and compassionate touch. Jesus showed by word and example *how* to deal with the pain and suffering of life, including the forces of evil present, not just in the world, but within our very lives.

In her reflection last Sunday on the synagogue encounter Jesus had with the man possessed by a demon, Ann said in her sermon that "sometimes we learn truths from our demons that we would not - or dare I say could not - learn otherwise... sometimes we learn more about the truth from the hardships than we learn from better times." And she cited such experiences as divorce, addiction,

unemployment, financial hardships, chronic illness, and death as moments when we perhaps are confronted by our own demons.

Some years ago, I did an internship at a mental health facility while taking courses in pastoral counseling at Iona College in New Rochelle, NY. It was there I met Rhonda, a woman probably in her 30's. She spent most of her time obsessing over a man who starred in one of the daily soap operas of the time. She was fixated on him and continually spoke about him to everyone she met, all day long. I remember sitting in on a staff meeting with psychologists and social workers as they discussed this client. They were trying to find ways to basically stamp out Rhonda's 'inappropriate behavior.' It was as if they perceived Rhonda as being possessed by some sort of demon. And they were going to take it upon themselves to get rid of it. I remember the insight I gained that day - an 'aha' moment that has stayed with me though it was some twenty six years ago. It was, in hindsight, a real epiphany for me. For as I looked around the room at the faces of all the staff members present, I realized how easy it is to look at some people with addictive personalities, like Rhonda, and see the demons which need to be exorcised, rather than the person who needs our care. The fact of the matter I realized that day - and know how true it really is from the perspective of time and experience, is that we all have our demons and that these mysterious and destructive forces come disguised in many different garbs. Traditionally, they have been described as the seven capital sins: pride, anger, envy, gluttony, lust, avarice and sloth. These are the demons with which we all struggle in one shape or form. These are the forces which can easily trip us up because it's always easier to see these mysterious and destructive forces at work in others than it is to see and recognize them for what they are in our own lives.

The Spirit within Jesus brought healing to those who sought him because Jesus words and actions proclaimed the unconditional love of God. It was at the heart of his message of hope and healing. It's why he made time for others. He cared enough to touch and be touched. The picture Mark paints for us today is a day in the life of Jesus, a day in which the healing power of God's presence is manifested through the compassion and care of Jesus.

God has a purpose for each of our lives. And some of us may have discovered our purpose through times of weakness when we have known the power of God's healing strength bursting forth in unexpected and surprise-filled ways - in moments of pain and in the crucible of emotional or physical suffering. The same Jesus who touched Simon's mother-in-law that Sabbath day so long ago is here today to take our hand, to touch us, to lift us up, to heal us.

Healing was an essential part of Jesus' presence to the people he came to serve. It can be no less a part of our own lives and ministry both within our parish family here at St. Paul's and within the world to which we are sent in his name.

But it often starts where it did for Jesus in Mark's gospel: in our home and within the circle of family and friends, extending to those we meet on the road of life. For as Sister Joan Chittister says, "it's the spirit we have, not the work we do, which makes us important to the people around us" – and empowers us, through the grace of our baptism, to be a healing presence for others.

Let us pray.

*At every moment of our existence, you are present to us, Father, in gentle compassion. Help us to be present to one another, so that our presence may be a strength that heals the wounds of time. And gives hope that is for all persons, through Jesus, our Lord and Brother. Amen. (Monks of Weston Priory, Vermont)*

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