

Mark 1:29-39

Year B – 2/4/2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Recall last week, in the verses that immediately precede our text this morning (21-28), we heard the story of Jesus entering the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach and while there he encountered a man with an unclean spirit. And what did Jesus do? He cast out the spirit through the power of his spoken word restoring the man to his former self and most likely back into the life of his community. Our text this morning begins with “as soon as they left the synagogue” highlighting the fact these two stories go together. This isn’t just the same day – the Sabbath – it is immediately following Jesus’ time in the holy space of the synagogue where he encountered a supernatural, so to speak, unclean spirit. He moves from the holy space of the synagogue into to the common space of Simon and Andrew’s home. Upon his arrival he learned Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed. A more natural ailment had overtaken her body in the form of a fever, which in Jesus’ day was extremely serious without modern day medicines. And then, like last week, we are told Jesus healed her. However, there is one more contrast from the healing in the synagogue. Last week we were told the healing came through the power of Jesus’ spoken word but today healing immediately

follows the power of his touch as we are told he took her by the hand and lifted her up and the fever left her.

The contrasts between these first two healing miracles are important for the author of Mark. In looking at scripture it's just one of the many techniques used by an author to shed light on some important point the author is attempting to convey. In this case, Mark is giving us an epiphany of who Jesus is; hence, why this text is proclaimed during this season of Epiphany.

And what is this revelation Mark is highlighting through these contrasts? Man vs. woman. Synagogue or holy place vs. house or common place. Supernatural spirit vs. a natural fever. Healing through the spoken word vs. healing through physical touch. Read together as a whole we see there is no limit to Jesus' power and authority. It is for all people, in all places, and in all circumstances.¹ From the very first chapter Mark shows Jesus challenging long-held religious customs of the day. He has healed on the Sabbath; that is he has worked on the Sabbath and he has touched that which was unclean. Just as Jesus will do repeatedly in Mark we are shown another component of Mark's Christology. The kingdom of God has come near and nothing will contain it. Not religious systems or interpretations of laws, which in some cases ran counter to the intent of God's original commandments that Jesus will, in a nutshell, sum up

in Chapter 12 in two sentences. Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. It appears Jesus has come to counter interpretations of laws and customs which did quite the opposite in failing to bring life, equality, inclusion, and love. Ben Witherington III makes note of Jesus' offensive actions in *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*:

Though there are later stories of rabbis taking the hand of another man and healing him, there are no such stories of rabbis doing so for a woman, and especially not for a woman who was not a member of the healer's family (*b.Ber.* 5b). In addition, there is the fact that Jesus performed this act on the Sabbath. Thus, while touching a nonrelated woman was in itself an offense, and touching one that was sick and therefore unclean was doubly so, performing this act on the Sabbath only compounds the social offense. But this is not all. The service of Peter's mother-in-law to Jesus (and the others) itself could have constituted work on the Sabbath, depending on what was done (.e.g., preparing food). In any case, later Jewish traditions suggest that women should not serve meals to male strangers. The important point about Jesus, however, is that he does not see the touch of a woman, even a sick woman, as any more defiling than the touch of the man with the skin disease. Jesus' attitudes about ritual purity differed from those of many of his fellow Jews. [p. 98].ⁱⁱ

It's no wonder Jesus was quickly perceived as a threat and became a wanted man. He challenged the very way of life of not only within the religious institution but he challenged the very way of life of the Roman government of his day. With his nonviolent approach to peace through teaching and meeting people

where they were at and providing for their needs be it feeding them, healing them, and restoring them back into community. Or perhaps it's seeing his neighbor in the enemy or foreigner as time and time again he crosses geographical lines on a map that separate and define one group of people versus another. Jesus ushers in a new way of peace and it's not through power, control, manipulation, and warfare but rather it is through love, compassion, and as we see today touch.

Over the course of many months now and most recently in the horrific stories of a medical professional using his position of power to grossly touch, degrade, and maliciously scar young women and girls for life we have witnessed physical touch play out in a way that is so counter to the way Jesus displays it. What we witness each time another human beings body is touched through means of power, coercion, lust, control, and without consent is abominable. It is inexcusable not matter how it might be spun when proved to be factually true. But it isn't simply touch it is through verbal means that diminish one person's integrity, social status, employment opportunities, and livelihood at the expense of another who seeks only to satisfy selfish desires and wants and retain one's control, power, and domination over another. The church we are a part of has social statements that apply and speak to situations such as these be it the power

over one sexually or the power over one through the means such as discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity or culture. Social statements that guide our church in being disciples' of Christ and vessels of peace, justice, and hope in a broken world. Statements that speak the convictions of this church such as and not limited to:

- Christians are called to *respect* the integrity and dignity of all persons, whatever their age, gender, sexual orientation, or marital status.ⁱⁱⁱ
- *Heal* those who have been abused or violated, or whose relationships are broken.^{iv}
- Living out, working toward, and supporting legislation, ordinances, and resolutions that guarantee to all persons equally:
 - Civil rights, including full protection of the law and redress under the law of discriminatory practices; and to all citizens, the right to vote.
 - Access to quality education, health care, and nutrition.^v

These are but just a select few guiding principles, convictions, and beliefs followers of Christ are called to live by. They are to guide the decisions we make individually and corporately as the church. When Jesus heals the unclean and spirit possessed man of last week or reaches out and touches Simon's mother-in-law in our text today he does so with the intent of restoring life. Giving life.

Respecting the integrity and dignity of all persons created by God. His ways, his life, and his death reveal He is not just for some be it the religious elite, rich, or Israelites but rather the kingdom of God he is ushering in and the good news he is proclaiming applies to all. He sees all. Has dominion over all. Loves all. Dies for all.

This is the good news we live by and live in. This is the good news we are called to proclaim and live out. Healing and wholeness can indeed through the power of our words but also comes through the power of touch when done through love and compassion because in the words of the Italian artist Michelangelo, “To touch can be to give life.” Jesus touched to give life. Human touch done in this way can bridge divides between us. Overcome obstacles that separate us. Bring the peace of Christ to those in need of it.

I am reminded of the closing scenes of the movie Philadelphia (1993) in which Denzell Washington’s character, an attorney named Joe Miller finally touches his client Andrew Beckett, a gay man living and dying from HIV/AIDS. In those final moments healing takes shape through the power of touch. Jones overcomes and is released of not only his homophobia but also his fear of touching a human being with HIV/AIDS. While Beckett is not physically healed one can sense this relationship that had been building finally reaches a new level through a single touch. Overcome and conquered are stereotypes, prejudices, and fears previously held not only by Miller but by society at large in that context and held yet today by many. Touch can indeed give life. Jesus is life! Amen.

ⁱ Brian Stoffregen; www.crossmarks.com.

ⁱⁱ As referenced in above commentary.

ⁱⁱⁱ “A Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions”; © Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1996.d

^{iv} Ibid.

^v *A Social Statement on: Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*; © Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1993.