

Spaces for Healing

from the pulpit of
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Psalm 147:1-6

¹Praise the LORD! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. ²The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. ³He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. ⁴He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. ⁵Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. ⁶The LORD lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground.

Mark 1:21-34

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured 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.

This morning's Psalm proclaims trust in God to heal the brokenhearted, to bind up our wounds, and to lift up the downtrodden. The power to heal has, from the beginning of believing people, been a power attributed to God. Carrying that trust over from the Old to the New Testament then, it should be no surprise that the first act of Jesus' ministry is to heal. His healing – everywhere he goes – gives reason to believe Jesus is of God.

Last week we listened to Jesus call the first disciples, while they were fishing and mending their nets beside the Sea of Galilee. We noted how they got up, with no questions asked, and followed after Jesus. Today we can see they haven't gotten very far when Jesus begins to show them who he is. Capernaum is a small town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, and in the gospels, it functions as the center of his ministry. Jesus shows up in Capernaum time and again, and mostly what he does there is reach out with his power to heal.

Did you notice how widespread his healing is in our passage this morning? He heals in the synagogue, in a home, and then among the whole town of people who come pressing at the door. He heals demon possession, a fever, various diseases, then more demons. Now, because demons book-end today's reading, let's pause and consider what they are. In the ancient world demons referred to any one of numerous, vaguely defined spirit beings. Originally they were not necessarily evil. Only over time did the idea develop that demons were evil spirits which opposed the purposes of God. In the Old Testament whole armies of demons are said to do battle with God and God's people.

By New Testament times, this notion that demons were evil further developed into the idea that they could invade human bodies causing disease, deafness and blindness. Or they could invade human personalities causing something like mental illness or emotional disorder. Simply put, in Jesus' time, demons, or unclean spirits, were standard explanations for things not quite being the way they should be. That which could not be explained otherwise, whether it be epilepsy or schizophrenia or whatever, might be attributed to demons. Demon possession meant something else too. It meant

that the person was removed from society; like lepers, they became isolated, from family and synagogue and community.¹

So pervasive in the religious culture was this notion that the human body could be overtaken by these bad spirit beings, that we are told that Jesus went from town to town casting out demons. In fact, in our text today, Jesus' first healing act in the gospel is described as his having authority over demons. So if, in our time, we think of demons as broadly as they are described in scripture, they can cover a host of internal sufferings: spiritual, mental and emotional, as well as physical sickness.

They might come in the form of serious mental illness which today affects one in four families, and is the leading reason people claim disability. Or we might recognize them in the internal suffering of an emotional disorder which current studies show affects 1 in 15 youth today.² Or they might be the kind of quiet suffering that is being given a bold voice these days in the # Me Too movement of people who have been abused, which so often leads to profound and isolating pain.

Biblical demons can be interpreted today as all kinds of internal trauma people may suffer for a short time, and others over the long haul: intense anxiety, depression, addiction, despair, or even that sense of guilt that will not let you go. The demons Jesus heals in our text have voices, and sometimes people experience those internal voices that say things like: we are not worthy, that someone else is better, that we are not competent enough, that we don't belong."

Jesus goes into spaces of worship, homes, and whole towns to heal people of that isolation. Now, based on biblical and historical research, I can explain what the demons Jesus confronts might be for us, but when it comes to the actual healing part, I have a lot of questions about the gospel accounts of Jesus' healing power. The challenge of the text is not so much about how to

¹ Paul Achtemeier, ed. *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, P. 217.

² PCUSA's Office of Health Ministries

translate “demon” into understandable realities, but how the healing Jesus does happens so fast.

Jesus shows up in the Capernaum synagogue to teach, when suddenly, a man with an unclean spirit recognizes Jesus as having power and authority. The unclean spirit itself says, “What have you to do with us? You are the Holy One of God.” And then – this is the part that troubles me – Jesus simply utters a few words... “Be silent and come out of him,” and that unclean spirit comes convulsing out of the man just like that (snap!) – and he is healed. Next, Simon’s mother-in-law goes from being down with a fever to getting up to serve supper to Jesus and his friends in an instant! These healings take place so fast it makes your head spin. And that’s the challenge for us ... The Bible has Jesus’ healing so quickly, and our own experience of healing can be so slow... especially when the healing we yearn for is spiritual, mental, emotional – the kind of illness that takes its toll on the inside.

But there is something else that is going on in this story that gives us hope. Here, at the start of his ministry, Jesus is beginning to usher in the Kingdom of God, which shows us the healing is not just about getting well; it’s about restoration to community. When Jesus heals, he also rescues people from being isolated and alone; he returns them to companionship. It is no small coincidence that the first healing Jesus does is in the synagogue, the place of religious learning and worship, and there is a word in here for the church today.

We are called to be a place where those who suffer can come, and be restored to a sense of community. The truth of the gospel is not dependent upon whether our internal suffering can be healed in a snap. The truth of the gospel is that God has the power to transform us from the inside out so that we too might participate in the newness of life inaugurated by Jesus Christ together. The church is called to be a space where hurting and broken people are restored to community, and by God’s grace, are made whole by being wholly welcomed in.

James Autry is a business consultant and poet, who has written a book called *Looking Around for God*. He talks about searching for the healing of his son. In one chapter called, “Chasing a Miracle,” he begins saying, “You don’t think about miracles much until you think you need one.” Then he goes on to recount how he and his wife spent desperate years seeking help for their autistic son. Many of you here know about that kind of seeking. They took young Ronald to countless doctors, specialists from their home in Iowa to New York City. They tried a psychic healer and they tried horseback therapy with a specialist who used animals to help children with special needs.

Finally, it was an educator who provided more help than any other and they threw themselves into supporting the public schools and their therapists, because along the way Ronald began to show great signs of improvement. Autry connects this experience of searching for healing to his faith saying, “With all that we tried, I believe we’ll never know what worked and what didn’t. Maybe none of it; maybe all of it...but I don’t waste time anymore trying to analyze it. I do know that at some point, while chasing after the one big miracle, I finally recognized the real miracle workers, and realized that miracles are happening almost every day, one person at a time, one teacher, one friend, one family member, one coach, one music teacher, one parent at a time.”³

There are all kinds of spaces where healing takes place, and if we chase only after the one big miracle, we might miss the spaces for healing that are revealed in much smaller ways. In the Capernaum synagogue, when Jesus called a demon out of the possessed man it was not simply “the one big miracle.” He would go on to perform many more, and he still does. But it is no small coincidence that the first healing happened in the sanctuary, in the place of worship where people were intentionally gathered in the presence of God. Jesus opened the doors to that sacred space wider than they had ever been flung open before.

³ James Autry, *Looking Around for God: The Oddly Reverent Observations of an Unconventional Christian.*” p. 55

And he welcomed into his holy presence, not just for the first time, but forever, every kind of demon that has us suffering on the inside and has people feeling isolated and alone. And then, from that place of worship, his power spread to a whole village of people as if to say, this healing power of God cannot be contained, it restores all kinds of people to a sense of community.

Mark does not explain why the healing of mental, spiritual, emotional and physical illness seems to have come quickly back then in the company of Jesus and why it seems so slow to come to us now. Our pondering about that will have to persist. But Mark does say this: Of all the people whom Jesus healed, the first one was a complete outsider, isolated, deemed unclean, unwelcome in the synagogue, abandoned by the society around him, who heard voices as if possessed by other beings. Jesus' first big miracle came in the restoration of many smaller things. So that we can come to know that the Kingdom of God means to live unhindered by anything that pushes people to the far edge of isolation and to live in the wholeness of Christian community and in the presence of God.

Jesus counters the voices of our internal sufferings with the voice of God who wants us to hear this: There are all kinds of spaces where God's healing power is at work in our lives; no one should suffer alone.

Be healed, Jesus says, and thereby be welcomed back into the fold of God where you will always belong.

Amen.