

## *God's Health Care Plan* (Mark 1:21-39)

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Last Sunday, this Sunday, and the next two Sundays, the gospel lessons taken from the first and second chapters of Mark's Gospel tell of healing – specifically they tell how Jesus 5 specific persons, and Mark also tells that in addition to these three, Jesus also *cured many [others] who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons (1:34)*. This Sunday's episode of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, is perhaps the least dramatic of the healing events.

But the preponderance of these miraculous healing events in just these few verses does get our attention. They happen in the beginning of Mark's gospel, as if to make us confront some very difficult questions right from the start, and as if to warn us, that, unless we understand these first events, we will not really understand that which follows.

I was forced to think more specifically about these healing stories because, in the week preceding the first of these Gospel episodes, I had to officiate at three funerals. One was for a woman who died of natural causes at the grand age of 95. The other two were funerals of persons who had died of cancer and other degenerative illnesses, both being in their early 70's. Where was the healing for them? How do the gospel stories of healing speak to them, and to their families?

But that is our life. We live between Jesus' proclamation just a few verses preceding this healing story that *the kingdom of God has come near(1:14)* and the completion of that Kingdom foreseen in the Revelation of St. John, when *[God]will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more,(21:4)*

But, you may ask, what of the *medical healing*? What about the healing of that specific illness? Well, there is a difference between *being healed* and *being cured*. We don't often make that distinction and equate our health with *well-being and wholeness*. That is not necessarily so. We can become *cured of an illness* through an astounding variety of medical procedures and drugs, but, though *cured of the medical problem*, we may still not be *healed* of that which destroys our relationships with God, with ourselves, and with others – an un-healthiness which may be the cause of a medical illness.

I have often had the very difficult task of speaking with terminally ill people. Sometimes they ask me, how they should prepare themselves for death. The answer varies, of course, but I do tell the dying, that they should make peace with God, with other people and with themselves; ask forgiveness for wrongs done, and forgive others for what they have done to you. Try to be in a state of peace. I tell them that they will not be cured of deadly disease, but they will be healed

That is why I also believe that the healing stories in the Gospels are not meant only as demonstrations of Jesus' power to cure one person of a particular illness. If that were so,

these stories would have no relevance to our faith, other than to relate one incident that happened long ago.

Even in the Gospel stories themselves, the healings and other life-giving miracles performed by Jesus do not offer a permanent solution to our mortality and ageing. The people Jesus cured of their specific illnesses probably were not disease and pain free for the rest of their lives. As they grew older, all the ailments of ageing probably afflicted them, too. They might have later contracted some other illness. Even Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, died eventually. Being free from disease or other physical ailments does not heal us of the basic problems of our humanity. As one observer stated it: good health is only the slowest way to die.

Healing, in the Bible, is not a medical event, but a spiritual one. The understanding of illness and health in the culture of that time was primarily a spiritual one; physical illness was just a symptom of a deeper problem affecting the soul.

I believe that the healing stories in the Gospels tell us a lot more than that – they tell us of God’s health plan for all of humanity, and for all of creation.

The story of the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law is one of those stories – it is astoundingly spare in its re-telling, but amazingly rich in its meaning. It all happens in three quick verses:

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

In these few verses, Jesus does several things which he will repeat later in his ministry and show that, as he himself proclaimed that *the kingdom of God has come near* and is seen in a new basis for relationships. First, he heals on the Sabbath – something for which his opponents will repeatedly criticize him (Lk 13:14; JN 5:1 ff). Sabbath day – the sign of God’s kingdom in the midst of human life.

Second, he took this ill woman *by the hand and lifted her up*. A pious Jewish rabbi of Jesus time would not have touched a woman, or allowed himself to be touched by one. But Jesus breaks down the barriers that stand between people, and through his actions, announces a new relationship of love and respect.

Third, Jesus heals without any pre-conditions. There is no indication of this woman’s faith. Her faith is as anonymous as she herself is. Jesus simply sees a person in need of his help, and he does what he is able to do. His healing action is a symbol of God’s grace and love – freely given without conditions.

His simple action proclaims a restoration of wholeness in the relationship between God and his people.

This woman's response to God's act of grace and healing is also just as surprising – and to some observers today perhaps even old-fashioned, even “sexist”. As soon as she is healed, Simon's mother-in-law gets up and *began to serve them*. - cleaned up the house, cooked dinner, set the table, fed them – everything that would make Jesus and his disciples feel welcomed and appreciated.

This woman's actions should not be taken as a justification for those who still want to restrict a woman's right to pursue a career outside of the home. Not at all. In *servicing them* this woman was following the example that Jesus would set for his *own ministry*, and that which he would set as an example for all disciples who follow him – to serve, to help, to care for the needs of others. As Jesus himself said: *the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve*, (MK 10:45; Mt 20:28; LK 12:37; JN 13:1 ff) It seems a simple act of kindness – she had guests in her home, and she showed them hospitality and kindness.

This woman's actions should not be taken as a justification for those who still want to restrict a woman's right to pursue a career outside of the home. Not at all. This is not a statement about women's rights, or traditional roles, or anything of the kind. In fact, this is the first of several occasions in the Gospels when women have understood Jesus' meaning, when even his disciples failed to understand. The widow who gave her meager offering (12:41-44), the woman who anointed the Lord's feet with costly perfumed oil (14:3-9), the women at the cross (15:40-41) and those at the empty tomb on Easter morning (16:1) – they all seemed to understand the meaning of Christ's life and teaching, even when his own disciples could not.

But, as I said, this is first of all, simply a story of one person's response to the healing power of God in her life – her response was to see a need, and to act upon it.

How often have we heard stories of people who have recovered from grave illnesses or survived near-death experiences, and who have felt that their lives have been changed, a second chance given to them, a new purpose in life revealed. And those stories are all very inspiring.

But we should not wait for something like that to happen to us. We all have been healed of our greatest illness – our incompleteness as humans – healed of that through Jesus Christ. Should we not live every day in joyful response to this healing? Should not every opportunity for service be our response to God's healing power in our lives?

But this brief episode does

he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup> They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup> and 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." <sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" <sup>26</sup> And the

unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.<sup>27</sup> They 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."<sup>28</sup> At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Some hints are in the story itself. It is significant, that in the Greek original text of Mark, this episode begins in the present tense. *They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered* is originally *They go...he enters*. With the present tense, we are not telling a story in the past, but are invited to engage with Jesus here and now. The healing of the demon-possessed man and the healing later that day of Simon's mother-in-law are events which present us with challenges for our own faith and life – today, in our present situation.

The time and places of these two healings are significant: the first healing takes place in a place of worship, the second in a private home. Both healings happen on the Sabbath day – the sign of God's kingdom in the midst of human life. Both healings take place in areas that are sacred in the understanding of the Sabbath – the synagogue and the home.

The synagogue – the place of worship and the study of God's word – is like the church – the place where God's people come to be reconciled to God, and to one another. The healing of the demon-possessed man takes place in that context – his affliction had separated him from communion with God and from his neighbours. With his healing, he is again restored to a *whole and healthy* relationship with God and with the other members of his community. As a sign of God's kingdom and its blessings, this is what the church should be doing – this is what we do in worship: create a healthy and wholesome relationship between God and ourselves, and between ourselves and our neighbours.

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