

Mark 1:29-39
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, 2015
The Rev. John Forman

So many of us are seeking healing. Not just relief from physical aches and pain. Anyone who has ever loved deeply will know grief and will find themselves seeking healing. To live life is to experience change, which means that every life will be touched by changes that involve loss; loss of abilities, loss of relationships, loss of freedom, loss of accustomed ways of doing things. We spend millions of dollars on medicine, therapy and advice in our search for healing, and these are often helpful. But there are some wounds that don't seem to respond as fully as we might hope. Some pain, some grief, some losses need a spiritual remedy to complete our healing. Some healing comes only by moving toward Christ's presence in the suffering.

In our Gospel reading, Simon-Peter and his companions hunt for Jesus. Some versions of this passage soften the verb—saying they “searched for him,” “they went to look for him,” or “they followed after him”—but I think that to say that Simon-Peter and his companions *hunted* for Jesus points to something more assertive, more compelling, more aggressive in their search. To say that on the morning after Jesus has healed many, Simon-Peter and his friends *hunted* for Jesus conveys the sense of anxiety or desperation that captures what we sometimes feel in our own desires for healing.

Our Gospel reading comes at the end of a day that began in the synagogue at Capernaum where Jesus spoke with authority, with *s'mikhah*, granted to him not from humans, but directly from God. Then Jesus re-enacted his encounter with Satan in the desert by casting out an unclean spirit. That evening is perhaps more spectacular still, as the whole town gathers to watch Jesus healing many sick and possessed. But between these two dramatic scenes, there is a quieter moment that would be easy to overlook. When Jesus and the four apostles get to Simon-

Peter and Andrew's house, Simon-Peter's mother-in-law is there, in bed with a fever. Two short verses later, her story ends.

Now, if we listen only from a 21st North American perspective, we might miss a rich insight in her brief but potent story. You see, her situation was far more challenging than a just a simple, high temperature. Today, we tend to think of a fever as a *biological* event that can be treated medically once we discover the cause. But the ancient world understood illness to be a *social* event—a disruption of the social network in which life's very meaning was at risk.

Simon-Peter's mother-in-law, the wife of his father's brother, would be living at her husband's house if he were alive. If she was a widow, she would be living either with one of her sons or back with her family of origin. But instead she is here at the house of Simon-Peter and Andrew, suggesting that she has no other living family members to take her in. For our ancestors in the faith, her situation was a fate far worse than any sickness. In fact, it was a situation potentially worse than death. Whatever set of misfortunes brought her to live with Simon-Peter have also deprived her of a role, of life-meaning, and they have also deprived the household of a key contributor.

Healing for us might involve seeking a cure in the form of medicine, surgery, psychotherapy or psychiatry. These are useful, but cures are not always possible. Healing in the first century Middle Eastern world focused on restoring people to a valued state of being within their social settings more than on biological, physical aspects. In this context the refocusing of life meaning and purpose becomes essential to healing. Healing included being accepted back into the community. Healing is always possible.

Jesus took her by the hand—touched her—and lifted her up. The verb that Mark uses to describe Jesus lifting her up is the same verb that Mark will use later to describe Jesus' resurrection. Jesus' teaching and healing, two faces of same

coin, are spreading and are increasingly inclusive. That morning, Jesus cast a demon of a man. Now he has caused a fever to leave a woman. Later, he will heal a paralyzed man. These are the beginning signs of a larger truth: There is no form of human suffering that Christ cannot heal.

But our Gospel story is more than a story about healing: This is the first of a series of incidents in Mark's Gospel in which a woman represents the appropriate response to Jesus' healing and teaching. Later we will hear of the poor widow's offering of two copper coins, of the woman with the alabaster jar of nard, and finally of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome at the crucifixion then at the tomb.

Jesus came and took Simon-Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her. Her response, without any prompting, was to get up and serve. Jesus has healed her by restoring meaning to her life and she took the initiative to serve Jesus and those with him. She is the model of discipleship, the model that Jesus consistently embodied, unlike Simon-Peter who called Jesus' attention to the crowd clamoring for healings, but did nothing himself about them.

Simon-Peter's mother-in-law reacted to her healing by serving Christ. For her and for us as well, there are some wounds, some pain, some griefs, some losses for which healing comes only by moving toward Christ's presence in the suffering.

Let me tell you a story: I have a dear friend, a priest, who before that was a Marine interrogator in Viet Nam. To this day, he suffers from profound post-traumatic stress that ruins his sleep with nightmares and that makes startling him a seriously bad idea. He carries memories of things that he saw and did that will never go away, but that's not what healing is. His is a suffering that will never be cured, but that's not what healing is. He his healing, but not because his wounds

have gone away. Quite the contrary. He is healing because he has surrendering all hope for a better past. Those memories are a part of who he is.

He is healing because he hunted and found Christ in the very heart of his pain. Having been touched by Christ and being lifted up by Christ, he turned and now serves Christ in others. Christ has granted him meaning in his suffering. He helps others who are suffering as he does to hunt and find the light of Christ within and around them. He works personally and intimately with people, seeing maybe six to ten combat veterans over the course of a day a few times a month to help them talk about and deal with post-traumatic stress syndrome. He helps them to encounter the version of the Gospel message that they need to hear in a way that they need to hear it: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Turn again, or turn for the first time, to God and trust." Prayer, support and a reassurance of God's forgiveness and love for them, when added to other therapeutic approaches has made a huge difference in a remarkable number of lives.

He is not saving the planet by himself, but Christ is working through him to touch people who respond to their healing by seeking to serve others. And so while my friend is not saving hundreds of people, his willingness to serve allows Christ to work through those people and healing ripples outward like rings on the water when a stone is dropped. Healing is not the same as curing. Healing is not making the pain go away. Healing is not the return of that which has been lost. Healing is wholeness. Healing is finding meaning in the loss. Wholeness and meaning even with the cracks and holes that life inevitably leaves us with.

Benedictine Sister Mary Collins has pointed out that "one of the greatest paradoxes of Benedictine life is that community living does not protect monastics from the suffering humans cause themselves and one another." And I would add that the same can be said about any church. "When newcomers to my community

are smarting from the conflicts that appear in human interaction,” Sr. Mary says, “I tell them that we need to think of ourselves as thrown together in the tumbler of community, where we bump into each other repeatedly and begin to break through one another’s defenses and reach into the concealed places of our hearts.¹”

Monasteries—and churches—are still, after all, human places, which means that despite our best intentions and our aspirations, we may from time to time be the source of suffering for one another. But there is also a mystery at work in this community—the mystery of Christ embodied. That means that we are free to choose, like Simon-Peter, to call attention to suffering in the expectation that someone else will act. Or, once touched and lifted up ourselves, we can choose the better part—to move toward suffering, not to rescue, not to save the planet, but with gestures of service to those whose lives we touch. In that way, Christ can transform their suffering and ours into wholeness—into love.

So many are seeking healing, here in this congregation and outside these walls. By restoring essential meaning to life, the love of Christ makes all healing possible. That’s what true healing is about. “Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” Once touched and lifted up, how will we choose to respond?

¹ Mitchell, Donald W. “Transforming Suffering” New York: Doubleday, 2003.