

HEALING FAITH

Pentecost 15 – Cycle B: Mark 7:24-37

One of the unique characteristics of the Christian faith is its tradition of healing. It is clear in accounts such as this morning's reading from Mark's gospel that the tradition proceeds from Jesus himself; and there is at least one instance in the gospels in which he sends out his disciples to proclaim the good news and heal the sick. The Book of Acts also suggests that some of the apostles healed the sick, although not on the scale Jesus did. Inasmuch as sickness in the Hebrew Bible was often seen as God's punishment for sin, the healing ministry of Jesus and his disciples was literally good news for any who held to that belief. It is interesting that Jesus, although his healing ministry included the forgiveness of sins, does not readily make the connection others make between sin and sickness; nor, for that matter, does the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible. Job's so-called friends accuse him of undisclosed sins: why else would such misfortune be visited upon one human being? Job holds fast to his understanding of God, an understanding which transcends the transactional theology to which his friends subscribe: "God rewards the good and punishes the evil; you, Job, must have done something to cause all this ill fortune."

The healings in today's Gospel illustrate two of the ways Jesus healed people. He healed the Syrophenician woman's daughter from a distance; he healed the man who was deaf and had a speech impediment through touch, the laying on of hands. In Luke, the woman who had suffered hemorrhages for twelve years touched Jesus and was healed. In John's Gospel, Jesus heals a blind man by making an ointment with clay and spittle and applying it to his eyes.

Running through all of these anecdotes is the understanding and faith that God's power and presence in our lives includes the grace of healing. The church has responded to such faith and understanding in different ways: I mentioned last week the Anglican Sisters of Saint John the Divine in Toronto whose mission was founding the largest rehabilitation hospital in the city. Lutherans, Catholics, and Salvationists have also founded hospitals throughout the world. Faith healers, such as Kathryn Kuhlman, were born from the Revivalist Movement in the United States. Christian Science sees healing as the primary focus of Jesus' ministry. The Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem date from the mid-eleventh century and have a long history of both building hospitals and defending Christians in communities around the Mediterranean. The history of Malta, where our Director of Music Sheryl and her husband Doug sojourn each year, is largely a history of the Hospitaller Knights being relocated to Malta in 1530 by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and then defending Malta against an attempted coup by the Turks. The hospital established in Malta by the order in the late 16th century attracted patients from great distances and was known throughout Europe and the Mediterranean countries for its excellence.

There are two interesting features in the account we read today in Mark's Gospel. First of all, Jesus is in Gentile territory: having spent all of his time until now in Galilee, he and his disciples come to the region of Tyre. Perhaps it was a holiday they were seeking; certainly Mark's comment concerning Jesus' entering a house and not wanting anyone to know he was there suggests Jesus was tired and in need of a break. In any event, we see in his healing of the Gentile-Syrophenician woman's daughter that his healing ministry was not restricted to Jews. Through this account Mark is saying to his readers that Jesus' ministry extends to Gentiles; that even though Jesus' mission is primarily to his own people, Gentiles are not excluded from the blessing Jesus brings. In Mark's Gospel Jesus doesn't go as far as commending the woman for her faith, as he does in Matthew's account of the same story; but her implied understanding of his proclamation of the grace and power of God is the thing that inspires Jesus' positive response: she approaches him and persists when Jesus tries to deflect her. Jesus sees her not as a Gentile, but as one who earnestly seeks God's blessing; and he responds accordingly. Mark does not say that he had compassion for her situation, but it is easy for Mark's readers to conclude that Jesus' compassion was at the heart of all the accounts of his healing ministry.

The second point of interest in today's Gospel is that even when Jesus is tired and wants to do some self-care, he does not reject someone in need.

For our congregation, these two features we note in today's Gospel suggest that we are called by Jesus to be in mission for others, not just our own members; not just people who share our doctrine and dogma.

And that during those times when we feel we have exhausted our resources to support and sustain those in need, we can still respond.

Early in my time in this parish, I had one of those four-weddings-and-a-funeral weeks, plus preparing for Sunday worship. I can remember saying to a senior colleague that I had no idea how I could do it all. He smiled at me and quietly said, "You can, and you will." So it is with our ministry as a church: God's power and presence are sufficient for our needs: part of walking in faith is recognizing that we never walk alone; that Christ is present in, with, and under our ministry and mission. And this accompaniment of Christ, which we understand to be in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, suggests how our faith is a healing faith.

Our ministry of healing takes many different forms. Many of our members work in the medical profession and use their very specific gifts to bring healing and comfort to others. Others use the gift of presence, which often includes assisting and helping people who need extra care. Others engage in prayer and its accompanying actions of encouragement and visits. Others accompany those who are ill, suffering, depressed, struggling, or dying.

However we minister, we do so as those who have received the good news Christ embodied and proclaimed. That good news is that God's love embraces all human extremity and need; and that Christ mediates that love as surely today, as he did 2000 years ago. But he calls us, as he called his original disciples, to bear his good news; to have compassion as he had compassion; to embrace in blessing all people in need, not just people of faith and not just our friends and family.

And when we become tired and spent, he would have us remember that his is his gospel that we proclaim; that we never walk alone.