

This sermon was written by Pastor Gary Smith for the First Congregational Church
Jesus, Healer, Savior

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Mark 1:21-34

The gospel writer Mark begins his account of Jesus' calling succinctly. He has just been baptized as confirmation of his call to the divine-earthly mission ahead of him. We rightfully assume that his calling was to bring salvation to us. Jesus viewed salvation to include a full life with health and happiness. Salvation included Jesus' healing ministry whose miracles demonstrate the power of God and signs that manifest his divinity. After calling his disciples to follow him, Mark begins Jesus' ministry with a story of Jesus preaching in the synagogue, being interrupted by a heckler, a man with an evil spirit, demon possessed. Jesus heals him by casting out the demon that possessed him.

How are we to understand such stories? Some people still believe in demon possession. The noted Christian Swiss Psychologist Paul Tournier in his Doctor's Casebook writes, "Doubtless there are many doctors who in their struggle against disease, have had, like me, the feeling that we're confronting not something passive, but a clever and resourceful enemy." Demon possessions of the scriptures have often been associated with mental illness.

No one knew anything about schizophrenia and bi-polar syndrome. They did not understand the nature of epilepsy. In the times of Jesus, they did not understand viruses or bacteria. Jesus did not explain the disease, he just cured the victim. I am careful not to label people and their conditions. I do believe in the power evil forces have in our world and that tempt each of us. There are evil voices of darkness calling us to get even, seek revenge, be jealous, get angry, enraged, become addicted, be fearful, even suicidal. But there is also the voice of the Spirit present to rescue us, assist us, deliver us from that which would harm us. And the voice of Jesus is authoritative and stronger than any evil that would tempt us.

Karl Stolz upon studying Jesus' healing ministry concluded, "The personality of Jesus and the application of his insight did directly affect both the minds and bodies of the sick. It was the value of every individual soul, and the combination of compassion and faith that he introduced into the world that has been and is of such profound significance. It seems evident that contact with Christ brought healing in its wake. Calm and quiet were brought to the most excited and agitated individuals. Confidence and hope were inspired in the most despondent and helpless folk."

Jesus came to identify with us common folks and sought to alleviate suffering in any manner in which he found it whether it be physical, mental, moral or spiritual. Not only was Jesus a great physician but Fritz Kunkel writes, "Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest psychologist of all times." He was able to treat and cure mental illness." Currently in our community with our lives and routines having been interrupted with this pandemic and isolation that we have experienced, people have been more prone to depression, agitation, abuse and suicide. We need the healing presence of Jesus.

After healing the man with the evil spirit, Mark informs us that Jesus goes to the home of Simon Peter and Andrew to heal Peter's mother-in-law and then of many of the town. Many sick

persons of the town came to Jesus and were healed. We discover that Jesus saw his purpose in preaching God's love and relieving human suffering. God desires that everyone is well. When Jesus uses the word salvation, he means to be whole in body, mind and spirit in relationship to God and one another. Several times in scripture we read after a family member had been healed, Jesus says, "Salvation has come to this household."

Why he goes to heal Peter's wife's mother of a fever is unknown. At that time, in that culture, fevers were thought to have been caused by evil forces and this might be the bridge of story from a man in the synagogue to Peter's Mother-in-law.

Maybe Jesus went to her to impress his new disciple, Peter. Maybe it was to win her over so that she would endorse Peter leaving his wife to follow Jesus. Someone suggested that Jesus healed her because mother-in-laws are viewed among the least and last of society and he wanted to make a statement that all are included in the kingdom. Quite frankly, I believe that Jesus healed her just because she was sick and he saw a need and met it, witnessed a hurt and healed it. She returns the favor by serving them, most probably by making a meal for them.

Jesus saw that the chief problems in life are unhappiness and frustration that arise in human relationships. He saw the devastating effect of hatred, resentment, bitterness and fear and stressed their opposites: understanding, sympathy, faith, trust, forgiveness and good will. We too can follow his example and manifest the gift of healing by offering to one another those same qualities of Christian empathy, faith, understanding and forgiveness. Christians are called to be spiritual physicians to heal with compassion the wounds, passions, transgressions, sorrows, sicknesses and infirmities of the soul. We can all manifest the gift of compassion to each other.

In the Dark Ages it was the Monasteries who provided care for the poor, the orphaned and the sick. In the 10th Century many parishes maintained hospitals. Orders and brotherhoods and nun-run charities were formed whose chief mission was the care of the sick. When the black plague invaded Europe, the Friars and Nuns cared for the sick and buried the dead while other locked themselves in their houses in fear. This early Christian legacy has continued in the United States where 80 Percent of the hospitals were founded by churches.

I recall reading about the mission work of the Congregational Church on the island of Molokai in Hawaii. A doctor was sent by the Congregational Church to assist Father Damien in 1875 who had built a village for 600 lepers. This doctor brought with him a new Chinese medicine that slowed the progression of the disease. From that beginning, a mission work was begun in Hawaii which resulted in several Congregational churches that are still serving on the Islands today. One of my youth served a UCC congregation in Hawaii.

My denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has had history caring for orphans with the St Louis and Colorado Children's homes, for the developmentally disabled, Woodhaven, and caring for over 8,000 senior citizens in facilities across the nation. Our first missionary was a physician, Dr. Alexander Barclay, who served in Jerusalem healing Jews and sharing God's love through Jesus Christ.

The Rule of Benedict said, "Before all things, above all things, care must be given to the sick."