

“Healing Authority”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 5, 2020

Mark 1:21-45

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 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.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And 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. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

I’ll never forget the summer I spent in seminary as a chaplain at Bridgeport Hospital in Connecticut. It was part of my training to be a pastor—my first extended experience with the medical system, and being present at times of death or great suffering. I felt disorientated walking into the hospital, disbelieving that I could have any part in the healing that took place there. The unit where I was to be responsible for spiritual care felt like a jungle of hallways, crowded with personnel, patients and what they called COWs (Computers on Wheels). A tour of the Emergency Department left me feeling even more inadequate, knowing that at times I would be responsible for ministering to whatever went on in the gleaming and sanitized rooms of this Level One trauma hospital. I walked through bustling units filled with confident hospital staff, and wondered what my place was amid all these professional healers. I didn’t have power to order medicine or set broken limbs, and I didn’t know anything about physiology or brain chemistry, so what was I doing there? Did my conversations with patients actually make a difference in their healing? Could fervent prayer that God be present actually make a difference to God, or change the outlook of the person I was praying with? I assumed that a “real” spiritual healer would look and act more like the Son of God.

The Jesus we see this morning is like the busiest physician ever. He has back-to-back appointments all morning, afternoon, evening and night. The next day he’s up before dawn, planning to “go on to the

neighboring towns.” We read that “he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.” Jesus’ power to mend bodies, minds and souls was so universally recognized that he had to stay out of towns because of all the people who came to him. That’s what true healing authority looks like, isn’t it? And how can any person today live up to those kind of standards? Yet Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, [writes that](#) “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.” This challenges my presumptions of spiritual powerlessness, and addresses anyone here who wonders how prayers and spiritual intervention can make a lasting difference.

Medical insights have changed a great deal in the last two thousand years, such that we’re no longer superstitious about leprosy being contagious, and we see chemical imbalance in the brain as a more likely cause of suffering than literal spiritual possession. Unclean spirits today show up by different names: alcoholism and addictions of other kinds, mental illness, crippling guilt or shame, haunting memories of abuse, public war-mongering, neglect of the poor or the elderly, paranoia in the face of others who are different, willful and short-sighted disregard of our planetary home, or the pervasive evils of racism and sexism. Such unclean spirits still show up with threatening power to destroy life. And while the Body of Christ today heals in different ways than Jesus did, we see within his miracles one aspect of healing that we might offer to one another and the world today.

The healing authority that Jesus demonstrates is an ability to stay present and connected, offering the healing that comes through shared speech, touch and community. When the leper comes to Jesus, he says, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Jesus *does* choose, not to keep his distance for fear of contamination by the leper’s uncleanness, but to touch and intercede, breaking down the man’s isolation and heals him. Those who are ill commonly say that the most damaging part of any sickness, is the loneliness and feelings of unworthiness that come with it. The same holds true for our common societal ills—we are taught to withdraw in helplessness or turn away from the suffering of our neighbors. Yet Christ demonstrates healing authority by reaching across such fear, taking responsibility for connection that breaks down isolation and leads to healing even when a cure remains out of sight. Today that might look like touching with consent those who believe they are untouchable, or loving with compassion those who feel unlovable, or protecting those who are vulnerable, or listening to those who feel like they don’t matter, or learning about the deep causes of racism and militarism, or proclaiming peace with our voices and actions in time of war. This is how prayer and faithful community—alongside medical interventions and public policy—lead to healing through the Body of Christ.

In the face of all that threatens to overwhelm us—our long prayer lists, loved ones in need, devastating wildfires in Australia, more violence in the Middle East, and a fraying public life, perhaps we can follow the longing song of Anna in *Frozen 2*. After singing of the grief and numbness which she feels, Anna says that all there is to do is “the next right thing”. “I won’t look too far ahead; it’s too much for me to take, but break it down to this next breath, this next step, this next choice is one that I can make.”

We have power through the one who calls us together, and who feeds us at this table of loving grace. So let our “next right thing” be to sing of God’s invitation, to open ourselves in prayer, to approach this table of communion, to offer healing support to one another, and be encouraged by the promise that we are not alone. Then when worship has finished and our service in the world continues, we may have strength for the healing and mending that God would ask us into next. Amen.