

“A Blessing for Healing”

Mark 1:21-28

January 29, 2012

I'm glad you are here this morning. In part because when folks are not here, I get this little nagging voice in the back of my head. I don't really buy into what it says, it's just something planted there years ago and, well, frankly, it pops up to nag every so often.

You see up in Nelson County in my first churches, folks spoke a good bit more literally than I was accustomed. One fellow in particular, Wilson, would apologize profusely for missing church. Then he would go on to describe how the devil had held onto his leg and kept him in bed on Sunday mornings. He was entirely serious. Unclean spirits, encounters with the devil and miracles were a vital part of Wilson's faith journey.

So to see you here this morning suggests either you won the battle, or you didn't have to fight it at all. And no, grumpy and sleepy as they may be, I'm not talking about any battles you may have had with the adolescents about going to church.

There is an old etiquette teaching that it is impolite to talk religion or politics in a social setting. To some extent in our current discourse, I'm not so sure the politics part still applies. I'm pretty certain the religion one does.

For example, it is not a good idea to introduce the subject of “faith healing” at a dinner party, unless one wants to run the risk of not being invited back. Images of faith-healing practitioners run the gamut from fraud and huckster to

anointed, Spirit-filled and angelic messenger of God.

Most folks in the circles we run in, religious or not, are probably as I was with Wilson, not really sure we want to go there. In the end, we just get silent if someone brings it up.

When we encounter this text, with its graphic depiction of a healing we retreat to a sort of middle ground with a handful of excuses: 1) Mark wrote at least fifty years after the birth of Jesus and used an oral tradition; 2) the worldview of people in Mark's time, infused with Hellenistic religions, made divine intervention common, while our post Enlightenment era relies on medicine and science for understanding of disease and illness; 3) we realize that what we don't know about God is way more than what we do know; and 4) it is difficult and unproductive to argue with another's faith experience.

And that is often just it, we rely on personal experience. For example, if one of my children were diagnosed with an incurable disease, and you all prayed incessantly for weeks, then one day the doctor declared the child cured, I would be the first in line at a healing service.

So what do we make of these ancient accounts of Jesus healing? Well first we need to note the prominence of healing in his ministry. Mark, more than the other gospel writers emphasizes Jesus' miraculous power to heal and exorcise. There are 18 miracle stories in Mark, 13 are healing stories and 3 of those are exorcisms. There is then, a strong hint in scripture of an intractable relation between religion and health. But how do they relate.

Our story today is the first of these and occurs immediately after Jesus' baptism, wilderness journey and the calling of the first disciples. It is the very beginning of his ministry and he has come to the synagogue to teach. There a man with an unclean spirit interrupts him. The man effectively calls Jesus out. Jesus, more effectively calls out the unclean spirit.

We moderns and post-moderns are amazed by the story, just as the observers were. Yet our amazement is different. We spend all our time, wrestling with the "how" of the miracle. The characters in the story are amazed on a different level. For them, this face to face encounter with a demon is all about teaching.

Where we ask "Are there really such things as demons?" the folks in the story know it is all about the teaching that all things demonic are on the way out. Whether it is the demonic hold on religious life by stifling leaders or the cultural forces that bring us down, Jesus is teaching with a new authority. In fact miracle stories are more often about the story told than the miracle itself.

Where in Matthew we *hear* the teaching of Jesus as he offers the Sermon on the Mount, in Mark, we *see* the teaching of Jesus. His care for the poor in spirit is demonstrated. The authority here in Mark is not power, it is Jesus' commitment to see the bonds of injustice loosed.

Scholar Howard Clark Kee points out that the word used to describe the spirit in the man means "impure," which means simply, contrary to the sacred. All that is against the sanctity of God is

considered impure. Jesus' teaching liberates the oppressed man. What he teaches is a healing word and action. Mark is signaling right in the first chapter, this is what Jesus' ministry will be about, words and actions that heal human beings.

It is significant that disciples were with Jesus as he taught. Eventually, they will be tasked with building up the community of followers. Eventually they will be the ones handing on the teachings of Jesus. Eventually they will be tasked with Jesus' ministry to free those in the community from whatever injustice binds it.

Eventually, we are tasked, as followers in community, with demonstrating this "new" authority that demands an exit for anything that binds another in injustice.

How does this work? You remember Wilson? As I indicated, I was mostly silent when he told me his stories of fighting the devil. Well, I've gotten a bit better.

A few years ago our administrator called me and told me there was a man who wanted to see me. He'd told her he wanted me to bless him. He wasn't a member and I'd never met him. Well I knew what that meant. He wanted money. We didn't get nearly the amount of folks we get here at Bon Air who walk in and need help. But we still got a fair share.

Often it seems they know if they confess they need money, the receptionist may or may not help. So I was thinking, "any excuse to get in the door." I usually will see anyone who asks, so I told Marcie to show him the way to my office.

He was what I expected. Pretty rough looking, clothes had seen better days, face hadn't seen a razor in a bit.

I met him in the hallway and ushered him into the office.

“Pastor, I don't need money. I came for something else. I just want you to bless me.”

He went on to explain in a rather articulate, if un-Presbyterian way that he had this “devil on his back” that he could not shake. My mind flashed to Wilson, but I continued listening.

As much as he had tried, he could not get rid of it, and he thought that if he could just find a minister who would “bless him,” the devil would go away. He shared all this in a rather matter of fact way, not desperate, or edgy, in fact he seemed in pretty good spirits otherwise.

Well I made some small talk about his journey, and then mumbled something about Presbyterians not usually casting out devils. In a bumbling way I was trying to tell him that we really have not been given that kind of power to heal. He sat patiently listening, clearly he was not interested in a lesson in ecclesiology.

“All I want,” he repeated, “is your blessing.”

What was I to do? This time my mind flashed to the times I touch a patient's forehead and offer Aaron's benediction.

So I said tell me your name. “Jimmy,” he said. And with that I moved over to Jimmy, sitting on the couch and I stood over him. I placed my hand on his

shoulder and offered a prayer. I prayed thanksgiving for God's presence in Jimmy's life, acknowledged God's continued presence in his life and care for him and the requested that God would take away this “devil” that was preventing Jimmy from being the person God intended him to be.

The I moved my hand to his forehead, and offered the benediction as blessing:
May the Lord bless you and keep you;
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you;
May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and grant you his peace.
Amen.

With the “Amen,” Jimmy got up, shook my hand and said thanks. Then he left. Not a word about money, gas, or food cards.

I never saw him again. But every time Brenda calls to tell me there is a walk in to see me, I wonder about Jimmy and how the prayer offered may have worked. And I've wondered too, if such a blessing for healing couldn't just be a prayer each of us in the faith can offer another when someone tells us they've got a “devil on their back.”