

This Is What I Have Come Out to Do: A Ministry of Healing
Psalm 43; Mark 1:14-45
January 31, 2010

SLIDE ONE: THIS IS WHAT I HAVE COME OUT TO DO: A MINISTRY OF HEALING

A young pastor is visiting an elderly woman in the hospital. She's very ill, gasping for breath, and obviously nearing the end of her life. She's hooked up to tubes and beeping medical machines.

After a brief conversation the pastor asks, "Would you like for me to pray for you today?"

"Oh yes," she says.

"What should I pray about?"

She replies, "That I will be healed."

The pastor gulps. He is a Presbyterian, post-modern, Princeton educated. Although he might confess that with God all things are possible, his rational mind, as well as his experience, argue against it.

So he thinks hard and then blurts out this prayer: "Lord, we pray for your sustaining presence with this sick sister, and if it be your will, we pray she will be restored to health and to service. But if it's not your will, we certainly hope she will adjust to her circumstances."

Immediately after the pastor pronounces the amen on this vacillating prayer, the woman opens her eyes and sits up in bed. Then she throws her feet over the side. She yanks out all the tubes and wires, and stands up. She says, "I'm feeling better. In fact, I feel better than I've felt in a long time."

The old woman walks over to the door, pulls it open, and sashays down the hospital corridor. The last thing the pastor hears before she disappears are the words 'Look at me, look at me. I'm healed.'

He leaves the room and slowly walks down the stairs and out to the parking lot. He opens his car door, and then looks up into the heavens and says, "DON'T YOU EVER DO THAT TO ME AGAIN."

In the four gospels, there are sixteen healing miracles of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark records ten of these, three of which occur in chapter one.

Last week I began a sermon series on evangelism. I said that as I have listened to many members talk about the Village Church, one of the themes that has emerged is that the Village Church has been declining in numbers, both in membership and worship attendance, for several years. People can remember when there were 100 church school teachers here every Sunday, and when the sanctuary was full.

I said last week that if we are going to become a growing church both in numbers and in discipleship, we would do well to emulate the ministry of Jesus and let his ministry become a template for our own ministry.

SLIDE TWO: PREPARATION, PROCLAMATION, PROPAGATION

Last week we delved into Mark, chapter one, and we saw in that chapter what Jesus had come out to do. He spent time in preparation for his ministry—in prayer and reflection. He

proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, calling people to repent and believe. And he set up a system of propagation by calling disciples to help him spread the word.

As you listened to that same reading today, you couldn't have missed another reason Jesus' ministry spread like wildfire. It was because of his ability to heal.

SLIDE THREE: PREPARATION, PROCLAMATION, PROPAGATION AND HEALING

Let's take a look this morning at the accounts of those three healings in Mark one.

SLIDE FOUR: THE HEALING OF THE MAN WITH AN UNCLEAN SPIRIT (Mark 1:21-28)
Jesus is teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, and a man who has an unclean spirit cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

Strange question. What have you to do with US? We would naturally expect the question to be, "What have you to do with ME, Jesus of Nazareth?"

What lies behind this story?

All through the gospels we keep meeting these people who have unclean spirits, who are possessed by demons and devils. The Jews, as well as the people of the ancient world, believed strongly in demons and devils. As one commentator put it, "The whole world was filled with devils; every phase and form of life was ruled by them. They sat on thrones, they hovered around cradles. The earth was literally a hell."¹

According to Jewish belief, the demons could eat and drink and have children. They were terrifyingly numerous. There was the demon of blindness, the demon of leprosy, the demon of mental illness. So many demons, and they are multiplying like little evil gremlins.

Before we pooh pooh what we judge as ridiculously ancient and superstitious, we need to re-visit today's culture. I googled the words: "Demon Possession in the Movies" and saw that there are over 18 movies about that subject beginning with "The Exorcist" in 1973. A belief system so ancient and yet so contemporary.

The man in the synagogue in Capernaum asks, "What have you to do with US?" He is clearly possessed not by one but by many demons. His mind has been taken over by these alien and malign forces. He is a man-- slash--demon. Hard to tell where one begins and the other ends. The man/demon is on the defensive. They know that Jesus has the power to destroy them. Demons, according to ancient belief, needed some human habitation. If Jesus is going to drive them out they will be extinguished-- no more.

The man/demon does not ask for healing. How can he, for he is not in his right mind? But Jesus--ever able to grasp not so much what people want, but what they need--commands the demons to come out of the man. And the man/demon has a convulsion and cries out and then...poof...is gone. The people who witness this exorcism are amazed; they have never seen anything like this before, someone who commands unclean spirits. "What authority he has!" The Greek word here for authority meaning unique knowledge combined with unique power.

¹, As quoted in The Gospel of Mark, William Barclay (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press) 1956, p. 25.

SLIDE FIVE: THE HEALING OF SIMON PETER'S MOTHER IN LAW (Mark 29-31)

And then the story shifts to another healing. Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. Don't worry, I am trying mightily to restrain myself from a mother-in-law joke. But just indulge me. I can't resist the temptation.

Q: What is the ideal weight for a MIL?

A: About 2.3lbs, including the urn.

Behind every successful man stands a devoted wife and a surprised mother-in-law.

Peter's mother-in-law has a fever. The flu? Strep throat? An infection? We don't know. Whatever it is, it is life-threatening. For without access to proper treatment, people with fevers became dehydrated and died. Jesus comes into the house, takes her by the hand, and the fever leaves her. She immediately feels so strong that she is able to **serve** them. I must tell you I winced when I read this story. She began to **serve** them. "A woman's place is in the kitchen." But we have to leave behind our world, and the stereotypes we have come to hate, and enter their world, the world of the New Testament, where a woman's identity, a woman's validity, came from two areas: bearing children and serving their families. When a woman could not bear a child in ancient Palestine, when she could not serve her family, she was diminished. So here Jesus restores her to her rightful place in her home and in her society.

SLIDE SIX: THE HEALING OF THE LEPER (Mark 1:40-45)

The third healing story takes place in the last five verses of this chapter, where Jesus heals a leper. In the "Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels" there is this line, "No other disease reduces a human being for so many years to so hideous a wreck."²

The ancient world did not understand that leprosy is a bacterial disease. Some thought that leprosy is hereditary; most everybody agreed that it is a curse from God. But there was wisdom in isolating lepers, making them live outside the camp and villages, for leprosy can be spread by close contact with the leper.³

No matter what, the leper himself felt cursed by God and was deprived of any normal human contact. People would bring food out to lepers and leave it while the lepers were at a great distance, much as you put down a bowl of dog food on your back porch for your dog.

In our story, Jesus **touches** the leper. Did you get that? **He touches him!** No one, no one would ever, ever dared approach a leper, much less touch him.

And immediately, Mark's favorite word, immediately, the man is made clean. Jesus then tells him to go to a priest so that the priest could certify his healing. The priest served as the chief ecclesiastical officer and the chief medical officer. This was the law of Moses, and Jesus, a good Jew, respected the Law. But the man is so deliriously happy that he by-passes the priest and goes everywhere to spread the word of what has happened to him.

Try to feel your way into his ecstasy. Skin that had been peeling and scaling away,

² Ibid, p. 35.

³<http://www.edcp.org/factsheets/leprosy.cfm>

gradually becoming pink and healthy. Fingers that had become stumps, restored. He races home for a family reunion. It has been years since he has put his arms around his mother and kissed her. Then he goes on to see whether the girl to whom he was engaged before those tell-tale spots appeared has waited for him.

His life has been given back to him again.

SLIDE SEVEN: BLANK

Now I want to spend just a minute in talking about the healing miracles of Jesus, for I know that they do stretch our credulity. We have the difficulty, on the one hand, of trying to honor the Bible, and on the other hand, of acknowledging what we know about medical science. We live in an age of cat-scans, and laser surgery and miracle drugs. How can we square what we know about science and technology with a world-view so different and foreign from our own? And to put it very bluntly, did Jesus really heal or are these stories myths designed to convey some deeper truth?

I believe there is a way for us to understand how Jesus actually did heal people. You talk to any doctor and she will tell you that the only reason a doctor can produce health is because the human body is biased in favor of health. The universe is prejudiced in our favor, and its powers are working on our side. Albert Einstein used to say: "When a baby drops its rattle out of a crib, not only does the rattle fall to reach the earth, but the earth rises imperceptibly to meet the rattle." So we don't have to work at seeking health. It's the way the created universe functions. God has built a drive toward health in our bodies.

If Jesus was God in human form, as the Christian faith claims, that means that all of God that can be expressed in a human being was expressed in Jesus. And if a fundamental part of God's nature is ultimate healing, ultimate wholeness, that means that Jesus carried in his person that incredible power. That's what Mark was trying so hard to express here--that when Jesus touches the leper, his healing power is imparted to him.

Let me try to explain it with a story. Two dogs are talking to one another. The first dog has hurt his paw, which has become infected. The only advice the second dog can suggest by way of treatment is for the first dog to lie down, rest the paw, and lick the wound. But suppose that the owner of the sick dog sees the situation, takes him to the vet, where the dog gets a shot of penicillin, and has the wound cleaned and bandaged. The speedy cure that would then come about would be a miracle to both dogs, if they had the power to talk things over. It would involve procedures familiar to us. It would involve a medical technique which is thoroughly in keeping with the laws of the universe. To us, the cure of the dog's wound would be no big deal, because we understand how penicillin is part of the orderly working of the universe. But to the dogs, who live on a lower level than we live, what happened would be amazing and miraculous.

To my mind, this parable gives a clue to what we call Christ's healing miracles. The laws of nature are not violated or suspended when Christ heals. What Christ did was to tap into the laws of nature which were not fully comprehended or understood by his contemporaries.

Engraved over the entrance to one of America's greatest medical centers (Columbia-Presbyterian in New York City) is this inscription: "For of the Most High cometh healing."

If all healing comes from the Most High, and Jesus was the Most High Incarnate, then in an unparalleled way, God's healing, restorative power was concentrated in his life. Could it be then that Jesus was able 2000 years ago to do what modern medicine can accomplish today?

Could it be that because he was filled with the fullness of God that he could penetrate some secrets of the universe which we have yet to unlock?

SLIDE SEVEN: THIS IS WHAT I HAVE COME OUT TO DO: PREPARATION, PROCLAMATION, PROPAGATION AND HEALING

Our theme is from Mark 1:39. This is why I have come out. Following our Lord Jesus Christ, the Village Church must aspire to be a place of preparation, proclamation, propagation....and healing.

The healing ministry of Jesus must be increasingly central to who we are and what we are doing. TVPC needs to become known far and wide as a sanctuary where we can enter and find healing, of body, mind, and spirit.

On Monday I received an email from a pastoral colleague of mine, Linda Loving, associate pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church: "Needless to say, as I lean into the startling diagnosis of breast cancer and necessary surgery and treatments, my energy shifts to other priorities and my calendar becomes most unpredictable. In light of that....I "bow out" of the thespian group and wish you well. Have enjoyed being with you....and as they say...."break a leg" as you enjoy further readings together.

Barbara and I had been invited, as you will glean from this email, to be part of a group of thespians who gather together once a month and read plays. And Linda Loving, quite the thespian herself, will not be with us.

Her email reminded me that sickness is the great interrupter of life. It enters without knocking, thwarting all plans, mocking the idea of certainty. It intrudes like a burglar in our home, touching every part of life.

So sickness is the great intruder, and we have our share of it here. If nothing else, then, TVPC is a haven where you can find strength when you have to battle, hope when you are depressed, and courage when the way before you seems blocked.

There are some of us here this morning needing that, beaten down by the stresses of life. There are some of us here today battling addictions which are crippling us. There are some of us here today who have children who are not doing well, and as someone has so rightly expressed it: "As a parent you never feel better than the condition of your most troubled child."

And there are some of us here today carrying old wounds. Wounds that can't be stitched or stapled or bandaged. They are hidden wounds, wounds of the spirit, painful memories that never quite go away. Memories of ridicule. Memories of criticism. Memories of neglect....prejudice...or hatred. Memories of physical abuse...sexual abuse... emotional abuse.

At some level we all need to be healed. I'm guessing that nearly all of us have some wounds which still ooze with hurt.

I want to end today with our reading together a Psalm of healing. For I believe that as we immerse ourselves in the great healing words of scripture, something help-full and health-full happens within us.

I want us to use Psalm 43 as a mantra. A mantra is a sound, a syllable, a word, or a group of words which are capable of creating transformation. As we repeat the words over and over again, they sink ever deeper into our souls.

I'm going to suggest we use the last four lines from Psalm 43 as our mantra. I will say the first line, you the second line, I the third, you're the fourth. And then we will repeat them

over and over again. Let's begin:

SLIDE EIGHT: PSALM 43

L: Why are you in despair, O my soul?

P: And why are you disturbed within me?

L: Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him,

P: The help of my countenance and my God.