

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Mark 1:29-39 (NRSV)

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. [30] Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. [31] He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

[32] That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. [33] And the whole city was gathered around the door. [34] 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.

[35] In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. [36] And Simon and his companions hunted for him. [37] When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." [38] 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." [39] And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

BARBARA

A minister told of a woman named Barbara who constantly needed assistance.

She showed up one day at the church office and said that she was about to lose her home. They tried to help. The church treasurer gave her advice and even spoke to the mortgage company on her behalf. But, they foreclosed on Barbara anyway.

For a while Barbara and her ten year old son, Jeffrey had to live in their tired old blue Chevrolet. Fortunately they were able to find housing in a place called the Jesse Jackson Town Homes. It sounded nice enough, but it was a public housing project filled with drugs and violence. Barbara was afraid to let her son play outside.

But, Barbara did keep coming back to the church for help.

Over and over during those long months, the minister would look up from her desk to find Barbara in the doorway, “her short, round body fixed there, often with her taller pasty-faced child looming over her right shoulder.”

- "Jeffrey needs shoes for school, and I don't have the money to buy them. Will you help?"
- "I don't have the money for car insurance."
- "I don't have the money for gas."
- "Jeffrey's not going to have any Christmas unless you help."

The minister said, “We gave her just exactly what she asked for, layer after layer of Band-Aids as we became overwhelmed by her persistent needs and our impotence in the face of those needs. We just plain came to dread the sound of our normally cheerful receptionist as she announced tiredly, ‘Barbara's here.’”

OVERWHELMING NEED

When I heard Barbara's story, I thought about our gospel lesson for today and how Jesus' day was monopolized by the overwhelming needs of the people.

Jesus touched people, and lives were changed forever. Demons were exorcised. "Incurable" diseases were cured. Jesus, unlike other religious leaders spoke with authority. Jesus said what only God could say; Jesus did what only God could do.

The word got out, and Jesus' time was no longer his own. The Scripture tells us that "everyone" in the city who had a physical or psychological need came to Jesus.

It's not easy when everyone with a need makes their way to your door. Like the ministers who were constantly confronted with Barbara's many needs, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. One minister said once that he felt like a "quivering mass of availability."

It can feel that way at times, not only for ministers but for all of us. There are so many needs in our community, and when they all seem to end up on our doorstep, we want to run away or at least get away for a while.

EVERYONE IS LOOKING FOR YOU

That's what Jesus did. The Scripture tells us that Jesus got up early in the morning, while it was still dark and went to a lonely place to pray.

They may not have had cell phones in those days but the disciples were still able to track Jesus down.

Simon and his companions were able to find Jesus, even in the lonely place. And it seems almost like a rebuke when they say to Jesus, "Everyone is searching for you."

The implication is that Jesus has erred by seeking time alone for prayer. There will be plenty of time for prayer, but right now there are people, lots of them, who are eager to see Jesus. Jesus' ministry is new, and the disciples are excited about the eager crowd.

"Come, Jesus, duty calls! Opportunities like this don't come around every day! You can pray tomorrow. Come take care of this crowd."

In this event, we have the first dispute between Jesus and his disciples.

This dispute might be characterized as the disciples' (and people's) desire to have Jesus go back to where he was vs. Jesus' (and the Heavenly Father's) desire to move ahead to new areas. Jesus did not come to keep the gospel hidden in Capernaum, but to spread it throughout Galilee and Judea and the world.

OUTREACH VS INREACH

How many "church fights" even today are over similar issues? How many church fights occur between those who are committed to once again becoming what we "used to be" vs. those who are committed to stepping out into an unknown and different future? How many churches struggle with pleasing the "people back home" vs. seeking to be faithful to God's call?

How many churches struggle with keeping the treasure of the gospel for themselves vs. spreading it throughout their communities and the world? How many churches center only on their members vs. centering on those who have not heard the gospel?

But, Jesus did not respond in the way that the disciples thought he should nor will Jesus let us in the church retreat to the past either. Instead Jesus said, "We need to go elsewhere. There are others who have not heard the gospel. That's why I've come, to preach the good news of God's grace."

The crowds would have made Jesus into their own personal miracle worker. They would have kept him in Capernaum. After all, there were apparently

many more people who needed to be healed. What do we say? Charity begins at home. No doubt they would have said something like that to Jesus.

A GREATER MESSAGE AND MINISTRY

It wouldn't be the last time that something like this would happen. Later in his ministry Jesus will miraculously feed a crowd of 5,000 with only five loaves of bread and two fish.

How does the crowd respond to that miracle? They track Jesus down and ask for more. According to Jesus the crowd had no clue that his miracles had a deeper, more important meaning. They just wanted more and more and more.

They wanted to make Jesus into their king. They wanted to turn him into a quivering mass of availability.

But, Jesus would have none of it. All of the miracles pointed toward a greater message. It wasn't just about healing a few people in that little town in the ancient world.

It was about proclaiming a kingdom in which the world would be healed, permanently healed through a message of power and salvation.

We are still trying to make Jesus into a local hero. We are still trying to define Jesus as a Savior whose sole job is to do our bidding. This Jesus is on call to answer our needs twenty four seven.

Indeed, God does hear our prayers twenty four seven.

But, God in Christ is more than just a miracle worker who meets our needs. God in Christ has a greater plan for all of us. Like the disciples we might be seeking Jesus for the wrong reason. We want Jesus to come home with us and give us what we need, to be our hometown hero.

But, as it was in the past, Jesus might have other plans. Instead of staying home, Jesus might want us to leave home. Jesus might want us to leave our

comfort zone and do something new in his name. Jesus might say to us as he said to the disciples long ago, “We need to go elsewhere. There is work to do in another place.”

BEYOND SURVIVAL

I talked with a friend this past week who is working with a struggling church. The church is aging. They are losing members and money as people die or move away. They are afraid.

And because they are afraid, they have begun to look too much at their own needs and not enough at what they are called to do. No longer can this church think about the greater mission to which Jesus calls them. They are focused entirely on survival.

And ironically, the more they focus on survival, the more their ability to do ministry and grow is compromised.

There was a minister in West Virginia who specialized in reviving small churches. He wrote a book about his ministry entitled, “Beyond Survival.” Once he was able to get the small church looking beyond its own survival, the church was able to grow as an agent of God’s grace.

HEALED TO SERVE

I know that all of us here today have been healed by the grace of God in many ways. But, God has healed us to do more than just survive. Jesus has healed us for a purpose and that purpose is to serve others in his name.

Did you catch that in today’s lesson?
Jesus first healed Simon Peter’s mother in law.
He touched her, lifted her up and she was healed.

What did Simon’s mother in law do after she was healed? She served. The story makes it clear. She was healed so that she could serve Christ and his

disciples. And I think that is our purpose as well. We are healed so that we can serve others in the name of Christ.

Quite often people talk about “waiting on the Lord.” Waiting on the Lord for most people means tapping their toes impatiently and looking up toward heaven. They say, “Okay Lord, do something. I’m waiting.”

But, this simple little story suggests that “waiting on the Lord” means serving. We are healed to serve. We are blessed to be a blessing. It’s not all about us. It’s about God and God’s will.

GOD’S WILL AND PRAYER

This past week Pat Robertson was on TV hawking his latest book about miracles. These books all say the same thing, “Life’s short. Pray hard.” In other words, if you haven’t received what you want, then apparently you don’t have enough faith. Go seek Jesus and have him come home with you. Pray harder.

In particular, Robertson warned about what he called the “faith trap” of praying for something to happen “if it’s God’s will.” Apparently, according to Robertson, if you think that God’s will is something other than what you’re praying for, you have a lack of faith.

Once again Pat and I are in absolute disagreement! I think that the heart of prayer and the heart of our faith is an acknowledgement that God’s will is broader and deeper than we could ever imagine. I unashamedly pray for healing, for myself and for others.

But, I also know that in the final analysis, we must rely upon something greater than just a physical healing. We need more than just a strong heartbeat. We need a heart for God’s kingdom. We must learn to live according to God’s will and not according to our own selfish desires.

Yes, Jesus healed many. But, the Bible tells us that those healings were signs of something greater to come.

Jesus was in the business of healing society as well as individuals. In addition to healing, Jesus also confronted the hypocrisy of religious and political leaders who didn't care one little bit about the plight of the downcast. Jesus had a compassion that went beyond the Band-Aid approach of just treating the symptoms of poverty and sickness with charity.

Jesus was willing to take on the religious and political establishment in the name of God. Just like the prophets of old, the ministry of Jesus promoted justice and righteousness in the name of God. The ministry of Jesus was about preaching good news for the poor and release for the captives.

And the same should be true of us as well.

Like Simon Peter's mother in law, we have been healed for a purpose. We have been healed to serve in the name of Christ. We are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a member of that body. Each one of us has been assigned a task by Jesus. We have a job to do for the kingdom of heaven.

BARBARA REVISITED

That brings us, as Paul Harvey would say, to the "rest of the story," that story about Barbara. You remember Barbara don't you? She was the one that a church staff was trying to help. Her needs were so great that quite often the ministers felt discouraged and overwhelmed.

Well, one day a member of that church staff was inspired by the Spirit to do something different. He came to the others in that big, influential church and said, "Let's quit messing around and really help Barbara. It's going to take a lot of money, but we can do it."

And they did.

Barbara enrolled in nursing school. She lived in a furnished apartment donated for the time it took her to complete her education. She drove a car provided by another parishioner. Her tuition and day-to-day expenses were taken care of by the church.

A straight-A student and only a step away from receiving her cap, Barbara announced, "I want to come speak to the church's leaders at their next meeting." She did come. She stood erect in her white uniform, a stethoscope around her neck and told her story of the eking away of her life and of the miracle of her new life.

And these are the words that every person in that room still remembers. They wept together as she said,

"Thank you for helping me when I could not help myself. Because of you, I am going to be able to help others. I want you to know this. Every single time I touch a person for healing, this church will touch that person with me. You will be right there."

Barbara had been healed to serve, and she knew it.

WE TOO ARE HEALED TO SERVE

You have also been healed to serve in the name of Christ. You have also been touched by the grace of God in Christ so that you can touch others in His name. Jesus told his ambitious disciples that he came "not be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus tells us the same thing today.

Today we once again think about the depths of God's grace. His Son died for our sins. His body was broken. His blood was shed. There is no easy cure for a sin sick world, and the Lord's Supper reminds us that grace is costly each and every time we take it.

But, God in Christ was willing to pay that price for us. God in Christ gave us everything. As the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, God even gave up his own Son for our salvation. That kind of God can be trusted to see us through, to give us what we need, in good times and bad times. (Romans 8:32)

And if we believe that, our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. As he gave up everything, even heaven itself, for our salvation, so we are called to empty ourselves of personal ambition. We are called to wait on others in the name of Christ. (Philippians 2:4-8)

Indeed, that phrase is in a prayer that I often use after the Lord's Supper. We pray something like, "Lord as you have served us, we go forth to serve others in your name."

Let's do that. We are healed to serve. We have been given a charge to spread the gospel in word and deed. Let us go and serve others in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN