

HEALING AND PRAYER

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2015
First Presbyterian Church of Marianna
Ted W. Land, Interim Pastor

MARK 1:29-39

I love the little story that begins our text this morning. It is so revealing. It says so much about Jesus, how all he had to do was take Simon Peter's mother in law by the hand, and she was healed. And it tells us that Simon Peter was married. You know, this is the only reference in all of scripture that demonstrates that any of the twelve had a wife, or children. We will never know how many were married, nor how many children they fathered. But we do know that Simon Peter had a wife, for there is no other way that he could have had a mother in law, except to be married.

And doesn't it say something about that dear woman, that immediately after Jesus healed her, she got up out of her sick-bed and began to serve Jesus and His disciples?

Remember, this was the Sabbath day, so I suppose technically Jesus broke the Sabbath law by healing Peter. The folks in the community of Capernaum waited until the Sabbath was over at sunset, and then they brought the multitude, all who were sick, all who were possessed with demons, to him, and he cured them all.

Now if we stopped reading here, it would be obvious what Jesus came to do. Jesus came to heal the sick and cast out demons. There can be no doubt about it. That is what He was doing. It is what people expected Him to do. It is what people came to Him for. It is why they brought the multitudes into His presence: to heal them of all their diseases, and to rid them of all their demonic influences.

We Presbyterians have been very much involved in medical missions and counseling ministries throughout the history of our denomination. Perhaps the most famous of all missionaries, Dr. David Livingstone, of the Victorian era, though he went into the mission field in Africa under the auspices of the Congregational church, was from a Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) background. To this day, we Presbyterians fund medical missions in 24 countries from Bangladesh to Zambia, alphabetically. Columbia/Presbyterian Hospital in New York City is one of the nation's finest and foremost medical centers. I was born in what was then known as Fort Sanders Presbyterian Hospital, in Knoxville. And in New Mexico, Presbyterian Medical Services is the largest health care provider in the state.

Many of our Presbyterian churches have counseling ministers on their staffs. In our Presbytery, two churches have housed branches of the Samaritan Counseling Center, a nationwide Christian counseling service. All of our seminaries require training in counseling for a ministerial student to complete their studies. I don't know that what we do in counseling ministry is exactly the same as casting out demons was at the time of Jesus, but we certainly help people cope with the demons that possess them in this modern world.

But the story doesn't end there, with Jesus healing the sick and casting out demons. Mark tells us that early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, went to a place that was solitary, private, deserted, and prayed.

Jesus came to pray. He came to teach us to pray. He came to show us that there is power in prayer. He came to show us that before and after each activity in His life, He spent time in prayer, usually in some solitary, private, deserted place. We Presbyterians don't have the same reputation for prayer and meditation that some other churches do, but we have some of the best places to pray on earth. We have Montreat in North Carolina, Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, Zephyr Point in Nevada. And we go to other places, like Marydale and Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky, Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico, Saint Malo in Colorado, Dogwood Acres, the Blue Springs Conference Center, just about any church camp or conference center for a time of prayer and personal renewal. There are people in other religious traditions who devote themselves to prayer, meditation, contemplation, for weeks, months, years, a lifetime.

When Simon and Andrew and James and John found Jesus, they told Him, "Everyone is searching for you."

Now what they meant was that everyone in Capernaum was looking for Him, bringing more to be healed of their ailments, bringing more to be set free from their demons.

Now we might expect that Jesus would say, "All right, let's get back to town, and I'll tend to them."

But that isn't what He said. That isn't what he did. He said, "Let's go over to the neighboring towns, so that I can proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came to do."

And that is exactly what He did. He took the message else where, and He did the same things there, preaching and teaching in the synagogues and casting out demons (and doubtless healing the sick as well).

The proclamation of the message is what Jesus came to do.

In the first chapter of the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (USA) there are listed The Great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200). “The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind, the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”

Thus, the first great end of the church is to do what Jesus came to do: to proclaim the message of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.

The last great end, the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world, is one of the ways of accomplishing the first.

Starting later this month, during the Lenten Season, we will be taking a closer look at those great ends of the church, and seeing what they mean to us today.

What I didn't realize until I was preparing this sermon is that healing and prayer, two things at which Jesus excelled, two things which Jesus spent much time doing, are not listed among the Great Ends of the Church.

We may just have to re-write them. Or it may be that they are so obvious, so necessary, to what we do and are, for what we do and are, that mention them is redundant, superfluous. Or maybe the healing and the prayer have to come first, before the Great Ends of the Church can be accomplished.

This I know: no great thing happened in the life of Christ without prayer. Everything that Jesus did was rooted and grounded in prayer. When we pray for healing, we are rooted and grounded in the one thing that can heal when all else fails, the power of God the Father Almighty, Jesus Christ the Lord, and the Holy Spirit.

And to that one God, three yet one, be the glory, the power, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more amen.