

Epiphany 5 B  
2.7.2021  
AJH+

*And he went throughout Galilee,  
proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

At the risk of sounding redundant, I have to confess that the core message of this morning's sermon may sound quite familiar – Jesus, once again, breaks down a cultural and religious barrier of his time to show the healing power of divine love and norm-shattering way of the kingdom of God.

Even though this room is empty, save the three of us here to produce this live-stream, I know what you are saying – “There he goes again, preaching about love and the kingdom of God.”

Before turning off your TV, closing your computer, launching a different app, searching for another church livestream to watch, or going to brew another pot of coffee, stay with me. While this may sound like a sermon whose point you've heard before, God just may, even still, have something new to reveal to us, you and me, in this old story from sacred scripture.

It's important, I think, to set the scene. Last week, we read what immediately precedes today's text, the first exorcism recorded in the Gospel of Mark. An unnamed man, possessed by an unclean spirit, a demon, came into the synagogue, a place he had no business entering and people with whom he had no right to interact.

In the synagogue, among the congregation, the demons taunted Jesus, calling him by name, revealing the divine life of the newly emerging teacher. Convulsing, Mark recorded, the demon came out of the man and Jesus' fame could not be contained.

This morning, we read of Jesus who has left the confines of the synagogue, along with his disciples, and entered the home of two among them, the brothers Simon and Andrew. There they find that Simon's mother-in-law is sick with a fever, a signal in first century writing that she was likely thought to be afflicted by life-threatening illness.

Jesus, we read, came near to her and touched her, taking her by the hand as he lifted her from the bed where she lay. Without any further detail from the Gospel writer, we learn that she was freed from her fever and began to fulfill the first-century acts of hospitality that would have been customary for a woman receiving guests in her home.

Lest we see this as a simple act of Jesus restoring a woman to health and returning her to the vital work of the home he is visiting, there is so much more complexity about this domestic scene from the opening chapter of Mark's Gospel.

She is, after all, a first-century woman. It might be too easy to attach our twenty-first century frustrations with gender roles on display in this scene; however, to do so may be to miss the power of what is being communicated by the Gospel writer. Jesus had no business going near a woman, alone and ailing with an unknown illness.

According to every custom and norm of his day, Jesus should not have been there, should not have bothered to see her, should not have concerned himself with her sickness. But, he does. Jesus heals her.

In these opening scenes of the Gospel, as Mark the Evangelist is setting the table for his telling of God's Good News, we are being invited to see the larger picture of what will come into focus, more and more, in the chapters to follow. Jesus' inaugural acts of ministry unveil what his ministry will relentlessly embody, from the shores of the Galilee to the cross and tomb in Jerusalem – the ever-expanding gift of divine mercy, justice, and love.

The first - An exorcism performed on an unnamed man who should have never been in the synagogue, an unclean person who was not welcome amidst the congregation,

Again - An early evening healing of a woman, so often unseen and overlooked, were but the first in what will become a series of boundary-breaking scenes.

A third event follows immediately after our assigned portion for today concludes – Jesus, moved with pity and compassion, reaches out to touch a man afflicted with leprosy, visibly unclean.

In all three scenes, Jesus sees someone that others would rather overlook, he touches those deemed far too dirty to embrace, he heals those thought too far gone for redemption.

As we hear these ancient words made new this morning, know that whatever ails you, whatever burdens you, whatever places of yourself you might wish no one to know – our Lord sees, our Lord knows, our Lord is ready to begin the work of restoration. Oh, that we would dare to receive such divine healing, such inestimable grace, such unfailing mercy.

And, would that we would go and do likewise, in the way of our Jesus – seeing and hearing, reaching and touching those places, those individuals that have been written off, forgotten, overlooked, or disregarded – for the mercy of God knows no bounds, no limits, no restraint.

Amen.