

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

MARK 1:21-28

## **Appetizers Are Now Being Served**

Does Jesus still heal people?

Did he ever heal people?

These are some of the questions today's Gospel raises. This describes the first healing by Jesus in Mark's Gospel but there are many, many more. In fact, the entire rest of the First Chapter of Mark - 25 out of its 45 verses – are nothing but healings. Jesus is baptized, is driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit and is tempted, returns to Galilee to preach that “the Kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news,” recruits his first four followers, and then heals, heals, heals, heals. Teaching in detail and traveling can wait; in Jesus' “first hundred days,” his priority was healing.

Is this believable? Especially when Mark and other writers talk about people who were possessed by an “unclean spirit” (as in this story), or by “demons?” Isn't this, ahem, *primitive*? Embarrassing, maybe?

Thomas Jefferson evidently thought so. Possessed himself by a deist sensibility shaped by the rationalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Enlightenment, Jefferson edited down the New Testament to his liking by eliminating “miracles.”

It's a pretty slim volume.

What you get is Jesus as a wisdom teacher – a first century Palestinian Jewish Confucius, if you will. Except Jesus' wisdom, according to those who knew him in his lifetime as well as those who passed on these vivid descriptions of him to the world, could not be digested without accepting *who he was*: the Savior of the world, the Son of God who died for the sins of the world and rose again, defeating death, God incarnate invading the world with his muscular love and urgent message to change – or else.

Christians identified him as the one who Moses predicted would come – the “prophet like me” Moses cites in today's Old Testament lesson. Moses says that if the prophet is the real one, obey him; if he's fake, he should die. Those are the options in responding to Jesus: not put his words on the shelf next to those of Confucius, the Dalai Lama and other wise people, but accept him as the Savior, or dismiss him as a fraud.

So, did he ever heal people?

Well, let's start with essentials. If the essential fact confessed by the first believers in Jesus – that he had died and risen from the dead, transformed their lives and offered hope to the whole world – is true, the entire Christian faith is based on a miracle, something unprecedented and outside of the natural order of things. Someone who had

been thoroughly killed by expert torturers and executioners, had been dead and buried for over 36 hours, had become thoroughly alive (leaving no body behind in the tomb) but alive at a level no one had ever been before, not merely resuscitated.

If *that* is possible, how would the healing of a blind man or of a woman with a hemorrhage *not* be possible if God wanted to do it? *If Easter is possible, all sorts of wonderful things are possible.*

So accepting the possibility that Jesus healed, I think, is part of accepting the possibility that Easter happened. *If* we believe that God is loving as well as powerful and would *want* to heal people. By describing this early and often in Jesus' ministry, with vivid, eye-witness details, Mark makes the point that not only *can* God heal but God *wants to*.

And describing various illnesses sometimes as “demonic possession” makes a very important point: **Sickness and disability are contrary to the ultimate will of God.** They are part of the brokenness of this fallen, pain-filled world, but sickness and disability are *not* sent by God to punish people and they *will* be banished by God when the Kingdom of God comes in its fullness.

How many times in the four Gospels does Jesus tell a sick or disabled person, “This happened to you because God is punishing you?” (Responses.) That's right, zero times. How many times does Jesus tell a sick or disabled person how much opportunity he or she will have to grow spiritually if she or he remains sick or disabled? (Responses.) Right, zero times. How many times does Jesus tell a disabled or sick person that they are too unimportant for God to be concerned with? Right, zero times. How many times does Jesus say, “Your case is hopeless?” See a pattern?

Now *other people* in the Gospels may say one or more or all of these things. In one of the most horrific passages in the Gospels, Jesus' *own disciples* asked him, in John 9:2, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus' answer was “neither.” But the question showed how much prevailing attitude he had to buck.

Jesus represented God's personal invasion of the world. Jesus made a special effort to reach out to the marginalized – which included the sick and disabled, who he transformed and filled with well-being in many ways. And many of them became his most loyal followers. Mary Magdalene, who was *not* a prostitute but someone “out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons,” meaning she was really sick with something that really scared and perplexed his contemporaries. Bartimaeus, the blind beggar outside of Jericho who threw away his begging revenue even before meeting Jesus, so great was his faith, was healed, and then “followed him” – to Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified. The out-of-control crazy guy in Mark 5:1-20, who was healed and became Jesus' lead evangelist in his home region, east of the Jordan River. These people, and more, knew the meaning of giving thanks with their whole lives.

Speaking of lives: people were willing to risk their lives rather than recant their faith in Jesus Christ. Do people do that for a faith they know is bogus?

Jesus then commissioned his disciples to go and heal in his Name and in his power and *he never told them to stop*. And for generations, healings continued – until the church hierarchy, overwhelmed by the gloom and other worldliness of the Middle Ages,

stopped believing. By the late middle ages rather than anoint people with oil as part of prayers for healing (see Mark 6:13), the church prohibited the use of oil except as part of last rites.

Stubborn grass roots belief in God as healer persisted, embodied by those who did pilgrimages to Lourdes, and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Pentecostals who stubbornly believed also that the Holy spirit had not, in fact, gone on an indefinite sabbatical after Pentecost, but still gave spiritual gifts to people.

God, of course, doesn't need the institutional church to transform peoples' lives, and sometimes when the church "doesn't get it," or people may not be in church, God goes *incognito* to heal people. The whole 12 step recovery movement is testimony to that; God is perfectly willing to be called a person's Higher Power in some vague way if that approach can save and transform a person's life. (I should note, however, that the first public meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous in history was in the basement of an Episcopal Church in Ohio in 1935.) About that same time, some Episcopalians and others in so-called "mainstream" churches began to realize that *healings still happened*. We don't have to wait until heaven or until the coming of the Kingdom of God in its fullness, to experience healing. Healing here and now may be "temporary" – we're still mortal – but hey, when you're suffering, "temporary" healing is just fine.

I was raised in a tradition which was oblivious to these possibilities, however, and trained in a seminary where the dominant opinion was that a guest speaker, the great historian of Christian healing, Morton Kelsey, was a bit *eccentric* let's say. People in a graduate school in Cambridge, Massachusetts might not really swallow this stuff.

So it was that I had a "map" of what I thought was "possible" in this era. I believed that Jesus healed back then, and maybe the apostles too, but I didn't think it happened any more.

Then more and more things happened which were way, way outside my "map" of the "possible." As a seminarian doing training in hospital chaplaincy, I saw advanced cancer reverse course in not one, but two different instances, cases the "experts" had nearly given up on walked out of the hospital. That was way, way outside of my tiny little "map of the possible." I asked one doctor, "How is this possible?" and he looked at me and said "*You're asking me, Chaplain? Isn't this your department?*"

Here at St. Barnabas, we've seen someone who once was blind – and now sees. We've seen someone who was wheelchair-bound for 11 ½ years – and then stood up one memorable August Sunday and said "I'm going to walk to the altar rail for communion." He later became an usher. We've seen someone come out of a diabetic coma who had a blood sugar number so high that the lab tech ran the test twice because she'd never seen a number that high before. And we've seen a baby who was given one chance in seven by the doctors of even being born alive be dramatically, spectacularly healed. We've seen a parishioner live years longer than he was expected to after his cancer diagnosis – and he still does. And we've seen a parishioner whose open heart surgery was moved up from Monday to the previous Friday because the doctors didn't think he'd live through the weekend get catheterized to see *how many* blockages he had to discover that the blockages had *vanished*. "These look like brand new pipes" were the surgeon's words; "What's he doing in here?"

Praise God from whom all blessing flow.

That old “map of the possible” I had that limited God’s healing to the past and the future is as inaccurate as maps from the middle ages. Healing happens. Thank God.

Of course, it doesn’t happen as much as we hope. The world is broken, and sometimes the fault line of that brokenness goes right through our hearts. But it’s not news to any of us that there is pain and suffering in the world. It’s not news that God’s will is not done perfectly all the time on earth. That’s why, in the Lord’s Prayer, we pray “thy Kingdom come” – that’s what we look forward to – “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” God’s will is done perfectly all the time in heaven; you could say that’s the definition of heaven. God’s will is not done perfectly and all the time on earth (duh). But we pray with joyful and confident hope that God’s will **shall** be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And we say that prayer also gradually realizing how much that wonderful future is beginning to “leak” into the present.

If we’re invited to dinner at someone’s house, we might get served appetizers – maybe a piece of cheese on a cracker, shrimp, little puff balls or whatever. They aren’t the meal; they’re the assurance that our host or hostess is *beginning* the process of both satisfying our hunger and whetting our appetite for the meal to come.

Miracles, I believe, are the appetizer course before the banquet of the Kingdom of God. If an appetizer from a human host might be a piece of cheese on a cracker, and an appetizer from God might be cancer vanishing from a person, *imagine what God’s banquet might be like!*

That will be **a feast of healing**. In the meantime we pray, look forward with confidence and hope, and tell everyone about the appetizers. They are still being served.

Jesus is the enemy of suffering and pain. Jesus will win. That’s Good News.

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