

Epiphany 5, Feb 4, 2021

Mark 1:29-39

LFLC

Last week Glenn Inglis told us that when we are asked by Jesus  
 “Who do you say that I am?”—Glenn said we can’t answer that question  
 without connecting “What Jesus does” and “What Jesus says”  
 to “Who Jesus is”. In other words,  
 omitting any one of these three elements means that we are unable  
 to grasp the full measure of who this Jesus is that we claim as Lord.

So following up on that nifty three-fold idea, I realized  
 that in today’s Gospel reading, we find a structure or framework  
 which outlines the three primary aspects of components of ministry—  
 whether personal or parish ministry.

And those three primary elements of ministry or service are:  
 first: acting locally—that is, looking at what do here and now;  
 second: reflecting theologically—that is, thinking about  
 what we are to be about  
 after listening to what God is telling us;  
 and then third: responding globally by looking around us  
 at the needs of the world around us.

And I will address those three components by picking up the theme of healing  
 that runs throughout this text and, hopefully, illustrate or outline  
 how that ministry or service of healing ties everything together  
 in order that what we do and what we say defines who we are.

So, the first element—acting locally. . .that is, providing assistance and help  
 to those closest to us who are in need: acting locally is seen in Jesus’ healing  
 of Peter’s mother-in-law and those at the door of Peter’s house.

Santiago de Compostela in Spain, Walsingham in England  
 St. Joseph’s Oratory in Montreal and other numerous holy sites  
 like Lourdes in France and Fatima in Portugal—  
 it is to places like these that pilgrims throughout the ages  
 have made their way in hopes of finding a miracle--  
 and they have left crutches, braces and walkers behind them  
 as silent witnesses to God’s power to heal them and make them well again.

Now, some people dismiss such journeys of faith as piety gone bonkers  
 while others complain that the time and money spent on such trips  
 are nothing more a waste of resources that would be better spent  
 visiting medical experts and taking advantage of high-tech equipment  
 instead of chasing rainbows and false dreams.

Others in the church, however, have come to the realization  
 that healing is an essential element of the Gospel message  
 and ought not be dismissed as an illusion or delusion.  
 For them, the scenes and stories of healings  
 found throughout both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures  
 ought to be treasured instead of trashed.

And, in fact, Mark's story of Jesus' ministry begins with a healing.  
 No sooner does Jesus call his disciples to his side  
 then he goes to a synagogue where he cures a man  
 with an unclean spirit; and then, leaving the synagogue,  
 he enters the house of Simon and Andrew  
 only to find Simon's mother-in-law in bed with a raging fever.  
 Taking her by the hand, he helps her up, the fever leaves her,  
 and she gets back to the duties of her daily life.

The story then continues by telling us that for all those whose lives Jesus touches—  
 whether they are close to him and his disciples  
 or whether they are strangers gathered on the street  
 outside Peter and Andrew's house—  
 for all of them, healing means a second chance.

Healing means giving people hope  
 where, before, there had been no reason to hope.  
 Healing means bringing people freedom and liberation  
 where, previously, there had only been bondage and slavery.

No wonder “the whole city was gathered” at Peter's door. . .  
 and it is no wonder that people today go to shrines and grottoes,  
 sacred temples and special places across the globe  
 to seek healing for body and soul.

After all, whether back then or today,  
 people believe that healing works. . .and it does.  
 And I say that because healing someone  
 is more than simply anointing them with oil,  
 laying hands on their heads and praying for an end  
 to their brokenness and suffering.

Healing, as I said earlier, is giving people hope—  
 the hope and courage and support and strength they need  
 to face whatever lies before them  
 and cope with whatever is happening to them.

And so, when we as a church take care of each other  
 inside and outside of our faith community—when we provide  
 for the needs of those who are hungry or jobless,  
 struggling to meet their rent payments  
 or put food on their tables or make friends  
 or find a church home and church family  
 where they feel welcome and wanted, comforted and cared for:

when we do those things to one another and for one another,  
 we are healers—a community of healers—  
 ministers or servants who pay attention to  
 and take care of specific, individual concerns—  
 which is the first element of ministry—**to act locally.**

**And that brings us to the second component of ministry--  
 which is the call to reflect theologically—**

that is, to hear and listen to what God is saying to us  
 and meditate on what it is that God is making of us.  
 Or to use Glenn's directives last week:  
 We seek to imitate not only what Jesus does  
 but what Jesus says we are to do and to be.

Now we find this element of hearing and listening in the text where Mark tells us,  
 that, on the morning after an impressive day and night of healing,  
**that Jesus goes to a lonely spot. . .to pray.**

Think of that: The Son of God prays; needs to pray; and does pray.  
 Pretty good example for us to follow, no?

To understand that, like Jesus, we, too, need to put ourselves in a setting  
 or to take ourselves to a place where we can not just talk "to" God but talk "with" God--  
 that is, to let the voice of God address us and struggle with  
 where God is going to lead us and how God means to change us.

You see, for Jesus, and the Gospel writers, healings are never ends in themselves.  
 Instead, they are included in the stories to point us to something beyond,  
 something more. . .and what is that something more?

Well, Jesus' very first words in Mark tell us:  
 "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near."

Healings, then, are signs that the reign of God has arrived—  
 and that the fullness of God's presence is among us, with us and within us--  
 and that wholeness and healing are available to all of us. . .

and, trust me when I say this:  
 No matter how strong or vital or vibrant we are or feel,  
 all of us. . .all of us. . .are looking for healing.

And if we need proof of that, all we have to do  
 is to turn on the TV or open a magazine or search google  
 to find and read or hear advertising claims galore  
 trumpeting the next fountain of youth  
 or the latest surefire miracle cure for whatever ails us.

Unfortunately, extreme makeovers and fad diets and little purple pills  
 or even traditional herbal remedies cannot guarantee us  
 what we really long for and are searching for—  
 namely, happiness and contentment, acceptance and peace.

Thus, the “epiphany”—which is a kind of “awakening” or “realization”—  
 the epiphany in today’s epiphany Gospel is the realization or awareness that  
 no matter how hard we try, how much we diet or exercise or eat right. . .  
 or even practice mindfulness—we cannot make ourselves “heal-thy”. . .healthy—  
 we cannot make ourselves well or whole.

Now, all of you know by now that I’m kind of word freak  
 and so I find it fascinating to note that the words  
 “healing,” “health,” “wholeness,” “wellness” and “holiness”—  
 all come from the same basic root— the Old English word *hal or hel or hoel*—  
 a word that means “full” or “complete.”

And that is why I say we cannot make ourselves well or whole  
 because, regardless of age, all of us recognize that we are somehow incomplete—  
 that there is an “emptiness” or “empty space” inside us—  
 that there is something lacking or missing at the centre of our lives  
 which is needed to bind and hold everything together.

As a result, we all need something or someone from outside ourselves. . .  
 beyond ourselves to make us whole— to “complete” us or “fill” us. . .  
 to fill that “God-shaped” or “cross-shaped” hole inside us.  
 And that “wholeness” or “wellness” or “holiness”  
 can only come from and be experienced in a relationship  
 with the “Holy” One—the “Whole One”— and that relationship, for Christians,  
 is found in and with and through the person of Jesus the Christ.

But how can we know if we have such an intimate relationship?  
 How can we know if we have been healed and made whole,  
 made complete and fulfilled—that is, filled full--  
 given a sense of contentment and peace?  
 Seems like an odd question to ask, doesn’t it,  
 because the answer seems so obvious:  
 “Well, we know we are healed when the pain is gone,  
 when the fever has come down  
 or when the disease or disability is no more.”

Sounds right, but, in fact, today's Gospel has a different answer—and, I think, a better one . . . and it is found in Peter's mother-in-law's response to Jesus' healing of her:

“The fever left her and she began to serve them.”

Now, despite what some patriarchal fundamentalists  
who want to boss their mates around might think:

This is not the Biblical definition of a woman's role—  
namely, to serve men. . .to serve food to men.

On the contrary: It is a statement of the truth that healing and wholeness and holiness  
are demonstrated by our service to others. . .our care of and care for others.

So, only when we are ready to turn our focus away from  
our own belly-buttons— from ourselves and our personal concerns--  
and look upward and outward to see and then serve others—  
only then are we sure we are whole. . . and holy. . .  
a holy community. . .a “holy communion.”

**And that brings us to the third aspect of ministry  
which is to think, imagine and respond globally—**

that is, to reach out and move out to wider concerns and larger issues  
beyond our parish walls, boundaries and even comfort zones.

And we discover this in the verse with which Mark concludes this story:

The verse which says that when Jesus' disciples follow him  
to this lonely place where he is praying  
and tell him that everyone is looking for him,  
he tells them that, instead of going back to Capernaum,  
that they are all going to head out to the next town to preach there  
because, as he puts literally in the Greek, “that is why I came out.”

"That is why I **came out**."

Word freak thing again: You see, one of the intriguing things about this phrase  
“came out” is the realization that the Greek word for church is *ekklesia*  
which means “those who are called out.”

In other words, as with Jesus, we, the church who are Jesus' hands and feet, eyes and ears  
in this world of ours--we, too, have "come out". . .have been "called out"—  
called out of the world in order to reflect theologically on what we have heard  
from what he has done and said we are to do and be.

And then, having listened and learned and been equipped,  
we are sent back into the world--not just our own little corners of the world  
or THIS little corner of the world. . .but called out  
and sent back into the “world” out there—  
that big, old, mean, broken and dying world out here—  
a world that is so much in need of the healing and wholeness  
that God can and does bring in Jesus Christ.

And, even more important, to do so without getting stuck in endless discussions about “how will we do that. . .” or “what will happen if we do that”. . .  
 or “do we have enough money to do that. . .”  
 and instead, grapple with our call to ministry  
 which is that we have "come out" and are sent out  
 to serve and heal the needs of the world. . .of people in the world.

Let me give you a brief example of what I mean: A week or so ago,  
 someone left an email on our church website using the link:  
 “To send a confidential message to Pastor Hergy”.

It was from someone who is homeless, hungry  
 and struggling with a serious enough mental illness  
 to prevent them from regular employment.  
 Now, I am sure that most of you have figured out  
 that, because of those and other reasons, this person was  
 and is looking for some financial assistance from me. . .from us.

In addition, all of us know that there is a potential for trouble if we give out money  
 to just anyone and everyone who asks for some cash to buy a hot meal  
 or a warm jacket or a pair of dry shoes or some smokes or a six-pack.

But what if we considered setting up a “voucher” program of sorts  
 at a local restaurant where the church would have an “account”  
 that someone in the position of being cold and wet and hungry  
 could get a hot meal and simply sign the bill  
 and the cost would be deducted from our “account”  
 which we could replenish as needed?

Or are there other ways you can think of how we could. . .or should. . .care for those very people  
 Jesus spent most of his time with helping, healing, forgiving and accepting?  
 Are there ways we can do and see and be “Christ” for such folks  
 and so share in the mission that the “holy” church has been given by Jesus,  
 which is to do and see and be like Jesus--  
 and bring to a wounded world and wounded people  
 the same healing and wholeness that God has so graciously given us?

We are invited to come to the table this morning to find and receive  
 those gifts of healing, of health and of wellness that Christ offers. . .  
 and then, having been made whole, we go in peace to serve.

Amen. SDG