

Sermon Text – Sunday, February 4, 2024 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1st Reading: Isaiah 40:21-32; 2nd Reading I Corinthians 9:16-23
Scripture for Message: Mark 1:29-39 “Service”**

We can read in Mark’s gospel how Jesus wasted little time doing what he came to do. These few paragraphs follow closely what we read last week and seem to occur on that same Sabbath day into the next morning. As we learn more about his life, we will see that Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath would cause him problems, but this time the healing of Simon / Peter’s mother-in-law was done in private with no one around to judge his actions. This time it was a healing of a woman with a fever and not a casting out of unclean spirits, however the people in Jesus time considered a fever as a sign from God that the person had “stepped outside the covenant” in other words had sinned. Although there is no mention of that in this story, not even a mention of the woman’s faith, we might assume that she was a believer since her son-in-law was Simon / Peter, but there is no mention of what caused the fever. Here there is no judgment.

As soon as Jesus went to the house, he was told of her illness he went to her lifted her up and when cured she began to serve them. Some might think this as a very self-serving gesture on the part of Jesus and those who were with him in the house. “Quickly, heal her so she can prepare our meal.” But I don’t see it quite that way. Jesus offers healing as part of his overall mission to release the captives and oppressed. This woman was suffering, and Jesus eased her suffering. She expressed her response to Jesus in her service to him – the word for “serve” used in the original translation is similar to the root found in the word for deacon. This woman became a deacon in Jesus’ ministry.

Others must have heard of his ‘healing’ powers, and they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. This was at the end of the Sabbath day, at sundown. The story does not tell us that they came to hear him preach or teach – they came for healing. Mark writes, “the whole city gathered around the door” this is evidence of Jesus’ fame. The people knew Jesus at this point for his power to heal, not yet for his authority to teach scripture or preach the good news. We are reminded yet again that the demons knew him when the people did not, therefore Jesus silenced the demons because he was not yet ready for his true identity to be revealed. Maybe because he knew that neither the Roman authorities nor the Priests would be willing to hear or accept that news.

Mark writes that in the morning – that would be the Sunday morning after the Sabbath was over – Jesus withdrew to a deserted place to pray. Jesus left the crowds and the ‘celebrity’ behind to be alone. Maybe Jesus’ needed the down

time after a night of healing and exorcising demons, I think we all would want to be alone after that. But I think maybe he didn't want the fame or to be known as Jesus the one who casts out demons and heals the sick, but rather as Jesus' rabbi and Messiah. Simon and the others hunted for him to take him back to the crowds who were searching for him. Maybe their thoughts were on the fame and celebrity that they would find hanging with the one who could cure illness and cast out demons or maybe they simply misinterpreted Jesus' mission – "C'mon Jesus isn't this what you came to do, they are looking for you, don't let the people down."

I wonder if he really cared that everyone was looking for him – his purpose was not to be a celebrity but to go out and proclaim the gospel. That was Jesus' primary mission, what God sent him to do, what he was born to do – proclaim the message of the good news and the coming of God's kingdom. The last verse in our reading this morning tells us, "he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons." Proclaiming was primary, the casting out demons was incidental to Jesus' message. The casting out of demons was his way of proving God's power and defeating the world's evil by dismantling Satan's kingdom.

Jesus did not come to us to sit in one place. He could have stayed in Capernaum, I am sure there were plenty there who needed healing or release from the captivity of sin and demons. I am certain his fame would have spread and maybe he could have sat around waiting for people in need to come to him. As his fame spread, I am sure people from all over would be clamoring for Jesus to heal them. It would have been easier, he might have lived a longer life just passively waiting for those in need to reveal themselves so he could help them. Thank God he did not.

Jesus did not wait to begin his ministry, in Mark's gospel we hear the expediency of Jesus' actions. Jesus acted immediately and at once. This is not passivity. Jesus came out to proclaim the word and that is what we are called to do. We are called to proclaim the word and to serve. Paul reminds us of this in his first letter to the Corinthians – I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! I am sure that was Jesus' thoughts as well, "That is what I came out to do." That is what the mission of the church is as well – Woe to a church that does not proclaim the gospel.

This message today is about service – exhibited for us in the response of Simon's mother-in-law to her healing. She got up and she served. That is what Jesus' did as well, he served the needs of those who came to the door. Jesus healed compassionately and mercifully – he served those in need but did not let

that get in the way of his overall mission. He stayed focused to his principal purpose of proclaiming the message, healing and casting out demons was incidental to that.

It's easy sometimes for us to let our compassion and the world's needs distract us from our primary purpose of proclaiming the message and illustrating the kingdom to a community in need. I think therefore a team is required to do what Jesus intended his church to do. We are all part of the body of Christ, and each can use our talents in different ways to not only proclaim the message but also compassionately and mercifully meet the needs of those who come to our door.

I want to talk about the purpose of Elders and Deacons in this church. It's been a while since we have looked at those roles. Elders and Deacons have been part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) make up since the time of Stone and Campbell although the roles have evolved. So, let's begin by talking about what an Elder is. In the early days of our denomination, when Ministers were more or less itinerate and moved from church to church proclaiming the word, an Elder taught the congregation, shepherded the congregation and guided the congregation. Today, in an era of "professional ministry" where your ministers are educated in seminary and ordained – the elder continues to perform those duties to some degree. Within the context of the general ministry of all Christians, the office of elder has always carried and will continue to carry with it a special responsibility for spiritual guidance and pastoral care. For Disciples, this means that, in cooperation with the professional minister, and under their leadership, the elder is concerned for people. In addition to the elder's prayer at the table, an elder seeks out those in need and comes along side them to guide them spiritually and as a part of overall pastoral care.

The church also expects elders to contribute to the growing wisdom and knowledge of the congregation. Not every elder can or should teach, some are story tellers – sharing the collective knowledge of the congregation's history to keep our traditions alive. This story-telling function is crucial – like tribal elders we pass on our traditions and help persons understand our collective identity as Christians and as part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). All elders, however, are to be knowledgeable about what is taught in the congregation and to be supportive of the ministry of teaching and learning. In our now every-other-month Elder Deacon meetings we focus as much on the teaching and learning as we do on the needs of the congregation. Woe to us if we do not proclaim the Gospel – for that is what Jesus came out to do.

In addition to elders, this church has a body of deacons [the Diaconate]. According to our founder Alexander Campbell – the role of a deacon is to care

for church property; receive, account for, and distribute offerings; and visit the sick. The role of deacon is different now, but we can still think of deacons as “ministering spirits” who come alongside others for blessing as God has “come alongside” them.

How does the role of deacon differ from that of Elder? Deacons are encouragers attending to the needs of the congregation and thereby keeping the congregation healthy. Deacons encourage by welcoming others, deacons are the “designated adults” of a congregation helping to set healthy limits and boundaries on behaviors that are detrimental or destructive. Deacons have their eyes and ears open and can report to the elders and the minister of a congregation the concerns about things going on in a person’s life – people who need “pastoral care.” Deacons handle sacred things, not only at the communion table but at the back table in the fellowship hall where the unguarded truth of the heart is revealed. Your prayers and care of a congregation make all the difference in the world for people who may be hurting and struggling. Deacons are ministering spirits who live out the mercy of God in deeds and random acts of kindness. Don’t think that because we don’t pass the trays during communion that as a deacon you have no role – a deacon’s role in this congregation is extremely important for the spiritual growth and health of each person here.

Our scripture message this morning reminds us of service and Jesus’ mission on earth. The woman who Jesus healed responded by serving others. In fact, all of the women of the New Testament who follow Jesus served in some capacity – like deacons of Jesus’ church. Jesus himself admits that he too came to serve others by preaching and teaching the message of good news and by helping others in their struggles whether it was illness or demon-possession, Jesus served the needs of others. Jesus did not wait for the world to come to his door, Jesus turned away from fame and sought out the needy, the poor in spirit, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. That is the role of the church today – we cannot sit and wait for the world to knock at our doors, we must go out preaching and teaching, helping those whom we meet along the way for that is what we are ‘sent’ to do.