

**“IS THE DOCTOR ALWAYS IN?”**

***Mark 1:29-39***

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

Jesus is healing his way through Galilee on the double. Just off an amazing display of power in the synagogue at Capernaum, his fame now spreading rapidly throughout the region, he comes to Simon and Andrew’s house, where Simon’s mother-in-law is fighting a bad case of the flu. Jesus takes her hand. The fever leaves her. Word gets out. And before Jesus can sit down for lunch, people are already bringing more patients—sick with all kinds of diseases, people with mental health problems, every medical condition you can imagine. By dusk, the entire city is gathered at the door, hoping for a cure either for their loved ones or for themselves. Jesus performs these healing signs well into the night. Then, before dawn, he’s up and gone to pray before pursuing his mission in neighboring towns.

I should also mention that Jesus is doing this work on his day off. All of this healing is taking place on the Sabbath. Genesis says even God rests on the seventh day. But Jesus is working through the weekend.

If this portion of Mark’s Gospel had a soundtrack, it would be the opening theme of the television show *ER*. Imagine the most heart-pounding, raise-your-blood-pressure, frenetic, intense music you possibly can. You’d be out of breath before the song ended, and that was the *beginning* of the show. Dub that music over Mark chapter 1, and you begin to appreciate the magnitude of what Jesus is doing, without his ever getting fatigued or burned out.

Here, Jesus reminds us of Isaiah’s description of an incomparable God:

*The LORD is the everlasting God...[who] does not faint or grow weary...Even youths will faint and be weary, the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

Remember in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus fends off the devil’s first temptation by quoting Deuteronomy, “One does not live by bread alone...” This Jesus—though human, and tempted like us in every way—this Jesus is someone we are not. This is no *mere* human, but the Son of God, who is just beginning to reveal his miraculous power. This is the Lord God in human flesh, healing his creatures, mending the broken places in his created order.

The way Jesus heals is unlike any other healer before or since. Of all the healers of the ancient world, there is no one to whom so many healings are attested. Even more, Jesus’ healings were instantaneous. Unlike the magicians, shamans, and others practiced in the healing arts, Jesus did no hocus pocus. No casting spells, no sorcery, no reading palms. Of all the documented healers of the ancient world, Jesus is the only one whose cures were astounding for their immediacy.

This also sets Jesus apart from the technological, medical marvels of our time. Yes, we can clear up infections, by-pass arteries, replace organs and appendages, and send even many cancers into remission, but if and when it does work, it takes time. We are called patients because we must be patient. We must endure the suffering to get to the healing.

Not in these accounts of Jesus' healing. With Jesus, there's no treacherous slog through treatment. There's not even an overnight stay in the hospital. No "take 2 of these and call me in the morning." And—glory be to God—no waiting on insurance for permission to proceed. Only, Jesus is given *all* the sick and possessed in the city, and witnesses say he cured *many* diseases, and cast out *many* demons, and he did it all in *one* evening. Almost overnight, in a world without cell phones and social media, Jesus has become famous for his command over things seen and unseen. Carrying a hospital on his own shoulders, Jesus is curing diseases, casting out demons. Even the unclean spirits obey him.

The Gospel of Mark is compelling us to see that Jesus is not just another interesting religious personality, a fascinating if controversial teacher, or yet another prophet sent to Israel. No this is the one and only Son of God, God in human flesh. Here is the one John the Baptist calls "more powerful than I...[who] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Jesus, Son of God, who commands not only the waves of the sea, but the billows of human pain, the flotsam and jetsam of the human condition, and they obey him.

So, Jesus, the Son of God, heals with speed, with power, with divine resilience. After he heals all of these people, he presumably sleeps before getting back up for morning prayers and on the road again. Mark is giving us a humbling demonstration of God's unflagging love for us. And this is how things go for Jesus and the disciples for some time—miraculous deeds of power, healing the sick, the possessed. Jesus even raises a little girl from the dead. "Dead you say? Why, she's not dead, just asleep," he says (Mk. 5:39). And he takes her by the hand and raises her up.

But then they come to Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, and the miraculous deeds of power come to a standstill. "He could do no deed of power there, except that he laid hands on a few sick people and cured them." So we learn that even Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Alpha and Omega, cannot heal everyone, and even he is amazed. In Luke's version of this story, Jesus anticipates they'll call him "Doctor," and tell him to cure himself, and they do. They ask him to do all the amazing things he did in Capernaum, but he can't. Is the doctor always in? In some cases, the answer is no.

In the Gospel of John, when Jesus' friend Lazarus dies, he gets word about it. But... "After having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stays two more days where he is before coming back to Bethany. When he arrives, he is so overcome with emotion that his body heaves. The text even says he snorts and weeps.

Later, under the weight of his cross, this Jesus who seemed invincible, and who carried an entire hospital on his shoulders, collapses under the weight of it all, and they conscript Simon of Cyrene to carry it to Golgotha.

And on the cross, Jesus, the one who healed so many with swift and astonishing power, is mocked and derided. “He saved others,” they cry, “but he can’t save himself” (Mk. 15:31).

I tell the gospel story in this way because I know so many of us are involved every day in the work of healing. Among us this morning sit doctors and dentists and nurses and other healthcare professionals and administrators. And there are those who’ve inherited the tremendous stress that comes along with caring for a loved one, whether someone who is sick or disabled. And there are those among us who are parents of young children, and who struggle each day to keep up with it all. And there are teachers among us, who are entrusted with the daily care of students, and who are asked to perform miracles for them with their minds and their pocketbooks and wallets. And there are social workers and counselors and chaplains and non-profit workers and ministers whose work is never done, no matter how many checklists you create and complete. There is always more need, more to do, more people who are hurting who need healing.

Our Haiti team has reached their destination safely this week. There they will operate a medical tent in a remote region of the country. The lines will be long. God bless them. They will serve and even cure many adults and children. But countless others will go untended.

A healing mentality is deeply ingrained in the personality of our church as we follow Jesus in his healing ministry. This congregation has a tender heart for the hurting people among us, in our city, and far beyond. We pour our energy into the ministry of healing. We often exhaust ourselves in our work. We come back home wishing we could have done more. We feel the weight of it all on our shoulders. And then, like building a sandcastle in the path of the waves, the tide comes in, and we look back and wonder if we made any difference whatsoever.

What do we do when there’s always more? Can we always be “in,” like Jesus? Can we heal every person, and take care of every need? Of course, we cannot. But we also can’t live disappointed that we cannot. Even Jesus, God in the flesh, comes up against a wall, here and there, all the way to his death.

Even back in Capernaum, when he goes off for his morning prayer, they go looking for him. There are more people to heal, but he moves on. Jesus knows that there are people who still need him, but he leaves. There’s more at stake.

Mark offers us just the smallest little cue in the story of the raising up of Simon’s mother-in-law from the flu. Remember, I said he “took her by the hand and raised her up.” But that’s the English order of the words. In the original order the words run this way: *‘He raised her up, having taken her by the hand.’*

The difference is that the gesture of resurrection comes first. *Then* he takes her by the hand, and the flu leaves. This is the good news of people committed to healing, who can never reach everybody. What is the good news that we have? Not only have we been given the ministry of healing, but we’ve been given the ministry of resurrection.

And, so, every day, though we cannot reach everyone, what we can do is make a resurrection gesture to the people in our care.

We stand among them, beside them, walking down the road of life, making resurrection gestures so that they know we care about them. They know that we love them. They know we're there to represent this larger story, so that—even if they live or if they die—God, the resurrection artist, is there amongst them...through us!

Is the doctor always “in?” Well, the Risen Jesus, the Great Physician—about him, we must say, “Yes.” Because on the other side of the Cross, God picked him up, and drew him to God’s right hand, so that Jesus reigns over all creation, above every authority, and even over death, itself. He sends to us the quickening Holy Spirit that makes us able to be agents of resurrection gestures.

Can we always be “*in*?” No. But the Great Physician is. And every day, the Risen Jesus raises us up, having taken us by the hand, and makes us able to do the same.

