

“MANY” IS NOT “ALL”

Mark 1:29-39

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on February 7, 2021, the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany. A limited number of people present but otherwise closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

In all three sermons I have preached in 2021, I have focused on the words with which Mark introduces his gospel – “the good news of Jesus Christ” – as we see it break into the world in the early days of Christ’ ministry. I have also spoken each time of limits within our world his inbreaking has not yet completely overcome.

Four weeks ago, I spoke about the limits of knowledge, as seen

- In leading American intellectuals who became enamored of Soviet Communism until they came to realize it was “the God that failed”
- In a long serving United States Senator who did so much for cooperation among nations and cultures but could not get himself to support equality among black and white in America
- In a rural preacher’s son who struggles with discovering that local customs and expectations of his upbringing do not necessarily bear the stamp of God and the impact that discovery has on his faith.

Two weeks ago, I spoke of Jesus Christ bringing the “kingdom of God” to the point that it is *at hand* in our world, but still not yet *in hand*.

And last week I sought to make the case that the greatest power Jesus Christ has is *power over evil*, and that though he calls us to join him with every act every day in overcoming evil, we realize that his power over evil is not yet fully in force.

In each sermon, I have tried to end with a call to hope:

- The hope of changing our minds toward a God who doesn’t fail
- The hope of freeing ourselves from the assumption that all local customs and expectations are divinely ordained
- The hope that comes with the opportunity of being *on hand* for the kingdom as it makes its way into our world and moves history toward God’s ultimate truth and justice.

In today's sermon – the final in what has turned out to be an unintentional mini-series – I want to capture the spirit of hope in Mark's gospel as *many* who seek Christ are healed of the maladies which lead them to turn to him in the first place and offer hope as well for those among the *all* who are not healed in the way they had hoped.

I.

Let's begin with the many.

A mere twenty-nine verses into Mark's Gospel, Jesus and the four disciples he has called leave the synagogue in Capernaum where he has healed a man from the loud and pronounced unclean spirit dominating his life and where religious leaders are astounded at the authority of his teaching.

As soon as they leave the synagogue, they enter the home of two of the disciples, the brothers Simon and Andrew, who along with the other two disciples, James and John, have – two scenes earlier – left their boats and their nets and their fishing business – and, in the case of James and John, their father – to answer the call of Christ: "Follow Thou Me."

Returning to home and hearth, Simon learns that his mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. It sounds serious. At once they call Jesus. Jesus comes into the room, takes her by the hand, lifts her from her bed. The fever leaves her, and she begins to serve them.

A few hours later, when the sun goes down, people bring to Jesus *all* who are sick or possessed with demons.

The *whole city* gathers outside the door, one neck straining to see over another, parents holding children on their shoulders, everyone seeking a glimpse of the healing and the healer in Simon's home.

They see Jesus cure *many* who are sick with *various* diseases, and they see him cast out *many* demons.

But by the end of the day, not all are admitted.

The next day, while it is still dark, Jesus gets up and goes to a deserted place to pray. Simon and the other disciples hunt him down: "*Everyone* is searching for you," they say.

Jesus answers: "Then let's go on to the next town, so I can proclaim the message there, for that is what I came out to do."

Leaving behind those who are seeking him in Capernaum, they travel throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in synagogues and casting out demons.

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It is an amazing story of action and movement: Healing/proclaiming/casting out demons.

It is non-stop.

It is successful.

It is crowd-drawing.

And it moves from village to village, town to town, city to city.

It is an exciting beginning to an exciting story: Indeed, God's truth is marching on. As readers, we cannot help but be drawn into the action, the speed, the success. The reign and rule of God is on the move, and there is much to celebrate.

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This is the time of year where a few aficionados in the congregation know and remind me – even in COVID Time – that pitchers and catchers report for Spring Training in eight days. It leads me to remember that when I was a kid playing baseball, seven or eight years old, our team played in the championship game of the church league in which we competed. I was a year younger than most on the team, so I batted far down in the order and played left field, which if you know anything about Little League in those years was a position of exile exceeded only by right field.

We went into the final inning of the championship game with a shut-out over the other team. Three outs away from the championship. We had a great pitcher named Miles – a freckled face kid with brown eyes and a raspy voice. All we needed was three outs. From my perch in left field I had a perfect view of Miles' windup and delivery, as he was a right hander. I will never forget what I saw:

First batter: strike, strike, strike.

Second batter: strike, strike, strike.

Third batter: strike, strike, strike.

Nine pitches. Nine strikes. Game over. Gloves in the air. Jubilation at the pitcher's mound.

It was quick. It was complete. It was joyful. And even though my only contribution was to catch a line drive in the second inning, watching those nine quick, clean strikes was probably the height of my sports career.

That is what the beginning of the Gospel of Mark is like: Strike, strike, strike; strike, strike, strike; strike, strike, strike. Celebration at the mound.

II.

But, even with Mark's pace and power, not every pitch is a strike, not every batter an out. Listen to what Mark says:

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons...

In the speed and success depicted in Mark's Gospel, we might overlook the fact that *some* were still left behind, *some* could only look into the house where the healings were happening, *some* were still sick, *some* were still possessed with demons.

All were brought.

Many were healed.

But *many* is not *all*.

The reign and rule of God is *at hand*, but not yet fully *in hand*.

III.

What do we do if we are among the unhealed? What do we do if we are in that gap between the *many* Christ touches and heals and *all* whom he does not yet reach?

It is a hard question to answer, and one for which there probably isn't an answer that satisfies. But the text offers some clues.

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Notice that *all* come to the source of the healing. All at least stand outside the door to Peter's house. They may not control the timing of their own healing, or even its ultimate outcome, but they come to its source in Christ.

Throughout my ministry, I have been impressed with the number of people I have known who stand outside the door, looking in where healing is happening, waiting to come inside, waiting to be invited, waiting until they will be welcome, waiting until they have the courage to go in and waiting in hope that healing will come to them.

When I was an Associate Pastor in west Texas, from time to time and I and the other Associate Pastor would be asked to fill the pulpit of Presbyterian Churches in small towns in our Presbytery, most of whom were not large enough to have their own minister. I was called several times to preach at two churches who shared a guest minister each Sunday: one in Childress, Texas; the other in Memphis, Texas. Memphis was two hours away from where I lived. Their service started at 8:30 a.m. So I would leave home about 6:00 a.m. Drive very fast across the empty plains. Preach, then quickly get into my car and backtrack toward home while stopping at the church in Childress to preach at 11:00 a.m.

Each church had about a dozen people. Only one of the churches had a family, but each Sunday I preached there, that family was present, on the front row: A mother. A father. A sister. A brother. The brother, maybe nine or ten years old, was in a flat, wheelchair bed, on oxygen.

Inside the church. Waiting to be healed. Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. Not in control of the final form of the healing. Not in control of its timing. But every Sunday at the source of the healing.

Every church I have served as a minister has had at least one family with a child in a wheelchair – most, children who have grown into young adults – coming to the source of healing every Sunday, waiting to be healed, waiting to be healed. Not yet among the *many* who were healed but waiting faithfully among the *all*.

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The text also leads me to conclude that it is not just the ones who bring people to be healed who need healing; in the uniqueness which is each of us, we are all waiting to be healed.

The Bible is full of characters who in some sense are waiting to be healed:

- Sarah¹ and Rachel² and Hannah³ and countless others who cry out in their barrenness
- Cain who is spared death for killing his brother but lives the rest of his life with a mark of reminder and protection⁴
- Jacob who is blessed by an angel but limps the rest of his life⁵
- Naomi who leaves her home in Bethlehem full but returns empty and changes her name to Mara, which means “bitter”⁶
- Isaac who tries to piece together his father’s attempt to sacrifice him, his mother’s separation from his father, and his mother’s subsequent death, until, through meeting Rebekah, he is comforted in his mother’s death⁷
- Paul with his thorn in the flesh, never identified for others, but which labels a gift and credits for instilling within him humility and utter reliance on God’s grace.⁸

Not fully healed, all these find their way in the world *with their limits*, incorporating into who they are the injuries they have sustained, using those injuries to further the purposes of God’s reign and rule on earth, even while they yearn for a quicker, more thorough healing within that reign and rule.

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Some in Capernaum who came to see Jesus could only peer through the window of the door with other townspeople and were not healed that day. Yet Mark reports no one doubting the *source* of the healings or turning away with anger, tears, or cursing. Perhaps simply seeing the source, they knew the world was changing, they knew something new and different was afoot, and they knew were part of it.

Amen.

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¹ Genesis 16.

² Genesis 29-30.

³ I Samuel 1-2.

⁴ Genesis 4.

⁵ Genesis 32.

⁶ Ruth 1-4, especially 1:20-21.

⁷ Genesis 22-24.

⁸ II Corinthians 12:1-10.