

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen

The New Testament is not a long literary work, certainly no War and Peace. Truly pocket-sized versions abound. They are all over most jails. The four gospels are even shorter. The one by Mark, the first written, is also the shortest. We have heard all the stories over and over, all our lives. Give us the opening line and we can pretty much fill in the rest almost by reflex, we are so familiar with the stories. Not verbatim mind you, but the basic plot line at least. We are more like the seminary student who, faced with a fill in the blank test, saw “The day of the Lord shall come like a \_\_\_\_\_” and wrote in “a shot in the dark.” We know the stories so well though we tend not to really focus on the specifics, so let’s go for a walk with the one we are privileged to call Lord but who was also fully man and our brother.

There are five of them leaving the synagogue-Jesus, Simon and Andrew, James and John, and where do they go? Interestingly to see Simon’s mother in law. Now let’s just pause it right here for a moment. Simon is soon to pick up a new name, Peter, and tradition has it that Peter, martyred at Rome, was the first bishop of the Church. Remember that Christ said to him, “You are Peter, the rock, and upon this rock I will build my church, and I give unto you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” and so on and so forth. Peter, the first Bishop of Rome, had a mother in law. That’s pretty strong evidence tending to show that Peter also had a wife. How our brother Benedict, the present Bishop of Rome, would interpret that in light of the priestly celibacy requirement of the Roman branch of the Church, I have no idea. He is a skillful enough German scholar that I am confident he has

just the right gloss to put on it, but it does make you wonder. Peter was married, yet he got the job done. And our Roman colleagues today are experiencing a severe clergy shortage, but I digress. Benedict will have to connect those dots.

Peter's mother in law was in bed, sick and running a fever, likely not too keen on having house guests, who probably didn't even call ahead. Even my own grandmother liked to say she was happy to see us arrive and happy to see us leave. Well they told Jesus that Peter's mother in law was down with the flu and feverish. Jesus acted on that news directly and simply, and this is the norm in Mark's gospel, where so much is done straightaway, with little or no discussion. Jesus took the older woman by the hand and lifted her up, which I take to mean to the point where she was perhaps sitting up in bed. At that moment, the fever left her and she must have felt a whole lot better because "she began to serve them." Someone in a piece in a recent Christian Century went from that 1/3 of a verse to conclude that she was the first deacon in the Church. That's probably a stretch, though if you remember from ordinations past, deacons are called to a special ministry of servanthood and are in the name of Christ to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely. I happen to think the same charge and call applies equally to priests and bishops, but perhaps it is because we were deacons first.

Peter's mother in law is mentioned no more, apart from virtually identical passages in Matthew and Luke, but at sundown the street outside her modest home was packed. Everyone in town who was sick or possessed with demons showed up. Now that takes in the entire broad areas known today as medicine and psychiatry. And not only the sick, the depressed, the psychotic, the schizophrenic, the whole town was there at the door.

Everyone was either there to be healed by this strange wonderworker, or to see the great man in action.

Jesus didn't disappoint them, though on several occasions in the gospels he makes it clear that he was tired of constantly being surrounded by crowds, could use a little peace and quiet now and then, put his feet up you know? Remember his humanity, which we sometimes gloss over when dazzled by his divinity. He never failed them though, and Mark tells us he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. Interestingly he did not allow the demons to speak. They knew him and were presumably afraid of him. Jesus was, again in his humanity, a creature of his time, which predated modern understanding of mental illness altogether. Freud was as alien to those folks as radiation therapy. Demons were the cause of mental illness, demons that were very real. Well, even today in our post-Freudian 21<sup>st</sup> century western mindsets, we speak of wrestling with our demons, and we name them-addiction, greed, envy, lust and so on. So while Jesus did his miraculous healing work 1900 odd years before Freud, he had a pretty good understanding of human nature. In a way the only real difference between now and then is that we have gotten past the personalizing of demons as two-footed and four-footed creatures.

After the sort of long hard day Jesus had, he must have been worn out. The healing process of that time was understood to involve a transfer of power or energy from the healer to the patient, and it would follow that the human healer might reach his limit for the day and need to rest and refuel. We all need to rest and refuel. A member of my prison congregation long ago told me that he was always more or less running on empty on

Monday nights when he had our weekly Eucharist. He needed to come to the altar there, lay his burdens down, and get refueled and re-energized by the Body and Blood of Christ. As he put it, and he was an old county boy from South Carolina, it's better than Geritol or Pepsi. And he was right. Well Jesus too had to refuel occasionally, and he often did it through solitude and prayer, sometimes in the desert literally, sometimes in a deserted place as Mark recounts today. He got away by himself, something we all need to do sometime. And he prayed. Just how in this instance, we know not. Perhaps silently, just sitting quietly with himself and with God. Perhaps by reciting or singing a psalm or two. Remember that the Psalter, or Book of Psalms, was the hymnal of Israel. Jeremiah Denton, a Navy POW in Hanoi and later a Senator from Alabama, had memorized all 150 psalms as a teenager in parochial school, and later wrote about how it helped him in prison. Martin Luther called the psalms the great healing book of the Bible, and we read and sing one here every Sunday. There are lots of ways to pray. My dear friend Lex Mathews, a priest in this diocese and dead now almost 25 years, told me once that his prayer life consisted for the most part of underlining things in books. My bet though is that Jesus perhaps combined silence with a psalm or two while in that deserted place when it was still very dark. Good divine relief after a hard day of healing.

Although I have never done it, my guess is that if we were to catalogue everything Jesus did in Scripture, in the four Gospel accounts and in the Acts of the Apostles, we would likely find that healing was what Jesus spent more time doing than anything else. And to this day 2000 years later, we as the Church remain in the healing business. Those who were here for Nancy Whaley's funeral on Wednesday heard me talk of a conversation

she and I had recently. We agreed she was not at all well, was in truth dying, but that she was also healed. And the two are by no means contradictory. Some of Jesus' healing works were likely of that sort, while others were truly miraculous. The blind suddenly see, the deaf hear, the tumor disappears, and so on. We of course offer the sacramental rite of healing and anointing regularly at services here, in the side chapel. When we began it, maybe ten years ago, we had no idea how well received, and thus obviously needed, it would be. The exact mechanics of Jesus' healing acts were unknown to us, beyond touching. He nearly always touched those he healed, and in the case of the blind he used a little mudpack too, of dirt and spit. I hope the rite or liturgy though was at least similar to what we do here:

I lay my hand upon you in the name of our Lord and Savior  
Jesus Christ, beseeching him to uphold you and fill you  
with his grace, that you may always know the healing  
power of his love. And I anoint you with oil, in the name  
of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And of course people sometimes offer specific prayer requests in conjunction with the healing rite. Even I though ignored a request once that I pray for the Boston Red Sox, after I stopped laughing. You know who you are, though I have forgotten.

Remember how we left Jesus all alone in the dark, praying in that deserted place? Well Simon and the others went looking for him and, finding him, they told him everybody was looking for him. Scripture makes it clear how popular Jesus was among the ordinary folks of Roman-occupied Palestine then. Jesus had the blue collar vote. He apparently felt he

had to keep moving though, that he could not afford to go back or to settle down in one spot. After all, he had set his face toward Jerusalem and all that meant for his time and for all time. So he said No, let's keep going. We have a lot more towns to cover, lots more people who need to hear the Word, and we might add see the Word made flesh. So he went throughout Galilee, preaching and casting out demons. The pay was non-existent and the work was hard, but he gave us the example of getting up and doing what had to be done.

The best seller of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis. I used to think that an almost impossible charge. Imitate Christ? I can certainly imitate Peter or Thomas or David or any number of others in Scripture, but Christ? Well, I was wrong. We can indeed imitate Christ, and we start right here at this altar. And after having been fed and nourished and energized by his Body and Blood, we go out from this holy place, we take a deep breath, we don't look back (no need to, for we know we aren't alone) and we mount up with wings like eagles, and do what has to be done, healing the brokenhearted and binding up their wounds in the name of Christ. Now that, I submit, is again the Gospel of the Lord.

St. Luke's

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