

## **A Strength Renewal Movement**

Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39      February 8, 2009

Well, it was the Sabbath. Jesus and a few of his disciples had stopped off at the synagogue in Capernaum. After astounding those who were there that day with the way he taught - with authority - a man with evil intent questioned what he was trying to do. Jesus quieted the man down amazing even further those who were there.

Then he and four of his disciples – Simon, Andrew, James and John - left the synagogue and stopped off at Simon's mother-in-law's. It was still the Sabbath and Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Jesus took the ailing woman's hand and he helped her stand up. Mark's report on the events state that the fever left her. There's no report of any words being spoken – no sacred incantation – no magic – just a firm handshake and a lift. Even though Jesus had already had an exciting and exhausting day and it was time for the Sabbath meal, he gave of himself for another.

So, what was so significant about this account of a healing? With all the fantastic healings that took place that day and on other days, why was this one so important that three of the Gospel writers felt the need to include it in their account of Jesus' life and ministry?

Several possibilities have been considered by Bible scholars. There have been those who have suggested that the writers might have been trying to point out the depth of Jesus' compassion – that, just as he cared about an illness as minor as a simple fever, he cares about the slightest problems or issues in our lives.

Others have suggested that the point of the story might have been to contrast the healing that took place in the synagogue in front of a crowd with this one in a friend's house with just a small segment of the immediate family present. The point being that Jesus wasn't about healing for show – that his compassion wasn't reserved for those occasions when his fame could be enhanced – that his attention to those in need wasn't so that he could become more popular.

Still others have suggested that perhaps the point the early church was trying to make was to set the stage for the idea that it is important for the community of faith to bring people who are in need of Christ's touch to him – that they were trying to say to us that our role as the community of faith, as believers, is to invite those around us to come and experience the healing that the message of Jesus Christ, that an encounter with Jesus Christ, enables to happen.

And still others have suggested that the writers were trying to put some distance between how Jesus went about ministering to those in need and the work of the exorcists and magicians and miracle workers of that day. There were many who used elaborate incantations, spells and an array of magic equipment, but that wasn't Jesus' way – just faith, a touch, some encouragement.

Perhaps there's some truth in all of the aforementioned possibilities. Sometimes it's just plain amazing to me all that can be gleaned from the simple stories in the scriptures. My suspicion though is that it is what happened after the healing of Simon's mother-in-law that is the primary point of the story. It's just a little phrase that the author offers after the healing that I think opens the door for what I perceive to be the primary reason the story is included: "Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." One minute she was running a fever and the next she was waiting on her visitors – those who brought Jesus to her and Jesus himself.

Now, my sense is, the author of the Gospel of Mark wasn't trying to build a case for that being her role in the household as a woman or the mother-in-law. No, I think the author was trying to say to the church, to us, that service is how we show our thankfulness – service is the response of those who have experienced new life in Jesus Christ. Experiencing Christ's healing touch results in our serving others with the talents with which we have been blessed. Serving is the expected response of someone who has been healed.

The author of Mark connects a couple of other episodes in Jesus' life to this stop off in Capernaum. Word of his work in the synagogue had spread. And so, at sundown - when people didn't have to worry about breaking the Sabbath laws that forbade healing on the Sabbath any more – at sundown, well, they went enmasse to the home of Simon and Andrew and they brought with them all those who were sick. The whole community was either inside the house or standing near the door to the house and many of those who were sick, got well. And every time someone was healed, every time evil was overcome, Jesus instructed all present to keep it quiet – to not talk with others about what they were experiencing or seeing. The disciples thought it was a strange thing to do – to keep his wondrous works a secret - but, Jesus had his reasons.

For one thing, the Bible scholars tell us, he didn't want the unclean spirits to be the ones spreading the story. He knew the evil spirits hadn't changed and he was afraid their confession of him as Lord, true as it was, would be misconstrued by those they told and that his work would be seen as of the devil. Saying, "Jesus is Lord," without there being any change in one's life is not what Jesus is looking for in our lives. It's not enough just to attend church and repeat the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer and to sing the words of the great hymns of the church. Jesus simply doesn't want people who only know the right words to be the ones telling others about him. He wants persons who've had their lives changed – who've been healed and who serve as a result. It's not about just knowing the right words to say, it's also about living lives of service consistent with what the words mean.

Now, another reason some suggest Jesus wanted what happened kept quiet was that he knew people wouldn't really understand his message until after his death, after the cross. He knew that everyone was expecting a messiah who would be powerful and popular, but the messiahship he was about involved such things as suffering and service, grace and forgiveness. He knew that such a message could only be heard, only be understood, after he modeled it, lived it until he took his last breath.

And still another reason some have suggested Jesus tried to keep the healings quiet was because they were not the primary point of his ministry and he knew there was a risk that people would turn to him, would follow him, for the wrong reasons – because of what he could do for them physically.

Again, I think it's what happened in the rest of the account according to Mark's version that reveals what is the most important lesson in this story – in this collection of vignettes from Jesus' life. It had been a long day – an exhausting day - and when it finally was over Jesus was left alone with the disciples and members of Simon and Andrew's family. And they tumbled into bed – exhausted and excited by the eye-popping events of the day.

And the next morning, well, Jesus got up early - before the sun rose - before anyone else - and he slipped out of the house and he made his way to a secluded area on the outskirts of Capernaum and there he prayed. The day after a long day of preaching and healing Jesus found himself a quiet place for prayer before he embarked on a new day. What was the focus of his praying? We're, of course, not sure, but we can guess that it included an expression of gratitude for the day before and perhaps the good night of sleep – I think it's safe to assume that there was probably some admitting on his part to God that he was in need of some new strength, new

motivation, new insight, renewal – and, you know, some reflecting on what happened the day before and its significance for what he should do in the day ahead.

Yes, there's a lesson in Jesus' experience for us in our day. And that lesson is that if we care enough to reach out and touch others where they are in need; if we serve, which is our call as followers of Jesus Christ; then, we too must take the time to be alone with God in prayer. If the Master needed to do it, then what makes us think we can survive without time alone with God in prayer?

Now, despite our tendency to think of these special places for being alone with God as places of calm - places of quiet - places where serenity can be experienced – places where we are able to fall into God's arms to be healed and strengthened – there's also a sense in which they are places where we struggle with what to do – places that offer us the opportunity to be tempted – to doubt ourselves. It's been my experience that there's nothing quite so tempting as the quiet and lonely places of my life. The places where I think nothing is going to disturb my conversation with God are where I come to grips sometimes with what is most urgent in my life. When I've gone away, removed myself from the hustle and bustle of life to talk something over with God, all kinds of stuff rush in and fight for some time with me. The places where we go to pray are dangerous places because they invite all that is in us to be fully present and that includes thoughts that try to keep us from hearing God and responding to God's will for our lives.

I think that's what happened to Jesus that morning after. His lonely place, the deserted place, where he hoped to talk with God, be renewed by God, was a place of temptation. We're let in on what the struggle was about when his friends arrived on the scene.

After Jesus left the house, the others awakened and noticed that Jesus' bed was empty. It was an urgent and anxious search party that set out to look for him that morning. People were already returning to the house for a repeat performance of the activities of the day before. So, when they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."

On the surface, like most temptations, it doesn't seem like much of one – a simple announcement that people were looking for him?

The temptation his friends were putting in front of him, you see, was the same one he had already been struggling with God about. It went something like this: "Jesus, everyone is searching for you. Let's go back to Capernaum and stay. Let's go back and stay where you healed the sick and astonished people with your preaching. Let's go back and stay where you are already a hero – where you have already developed a following – let's build on the success you have already had. Let's capitalize on your popularity. Jesus, think of it, you can be Capernaum's local wonder boy – their wonder worker, their private priest."

There Jesus was – out in the wilderness – in a lonely place – with a decision to make about the direction of his ministry and he'd reached a different conclusion than Peter and the rest of them. Yes, he could have gone back to Capernaum and a life of comfort and popularity. Yes, he could have continued healing, meeting the physical needs of people and had his reputation as a faith-healer engraved on his tombstone. But, a tombstone based on being popular wasn't where it was at for him – wasn't how he understood what God wanted him to do with his life.

He chose Golgotha, the cross, a life of sacrifice, rather than the “Hosannas” that were waiting for him in Capernaum. The lonely place on the outskirts of Capernaum wasn’t a place of serene reflection for Jesus that morning after the Sabbath. It was a place where a momentous decision had to be made – whether to accept the kingdom of fame and fortune - the kingdom of self-interest – or, the kingdom of God. And Jesus said, “Let’s go on, brothers and sisters. I need to share the message in other places also. I came to preach to all God’s saving message.”

Brothers and sisters of Maple Grove – ours is a ministry of healing and serving and praying and preaching. And, it’s not just a ministry that we do for and with one another. We are called to minister – to live out the faith – beyond these walls – beyond our membership or constituent rolls. The challenge for us is not to succumb to the temptation to rest on our laurels and be satisfied with how well we’re ministering to ourselves. The challenge is for us to figure out how it is we are to move beyond our community of faith into the neighborhood – into the larger community - beyond the walls we now know. The challenge for us is to pay attention to the signals God is sending to our faith-antennae suggesting to us who it is we are to reach out to and minister among. Christ decided to not be satisfied with what was most comfortable and to continue going to others and he invites us to do the same. What will our response be? That’s certainly the invitation to Christian Discipleship this morning.

But, there’s something else I want to quickly reference gleaned from the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah. Bible scholars believe the book of Isaiah to be the merger of the work of at least two prophets. Prior to chapter 40 the prophet who was the one whose work was being reported on was lambasting the people of Judah who were living in captivity in Babylon for giving into the culture – for worshipping the gods of the Babylonians. “Many of those in captivity felt that they were in this predicament because of the powerlessness of their God to secure the safety of the nation. The Jewish community was thus in danger of losing its spiritual identity.”<sup>1</sup>

And then beginning with the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter the author has the prophet’s words have a different ring to them. Cyrus had become the new leader of Babylon and this prophet saw the change in leadership to be the ticket to freedom for his people. He believed Cyrus was an instrument of God and his people would be able to finally return to their homeland. So, his message was an attempt to inspire his people – to instill some hope in them – to stir a renewed faith in God – cast a vision of the possibility for them to return home. He began with words of comfort – not just a sort of soothing – but rather, a strengthening.

“Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these?  
He who brings out their host and numbers them,  
Calling them all by name; because he is great in strength,  
Mighty in power, not one is missing.  
What do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel,  
‘My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God?’  
Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.  
Even youths will faint and be weary,

And 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.”

Having our strength renewed – being able to soar like eagles, swiftly run, walk without getting weary – involves waiting faithfully for God – surrendering ourselves completely to God – because God does not grow weary – God renews – God restores. God is in charge of creation – God cares for us. God is not absent. Do not fear. God is with us.

Let us pray.

1. Curtis Lewis, “Lord of All,” Old Testament Sermons for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 2003), 0-7880-1899-XA.
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