

The Message
Meditation for East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church
February 5, 2012
Rev. Jim Stover

Text: Mark 1: 29-39

Theme: The call of discipleship in the way of Jesus as seen in this passage involves not the adoration of crowds, but rather simple acts of spending time daily in prayer connecting with our loving God and simple acts of humble service.

Today we continue our quick march through the action-packed opening chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Just a few short verses ago we heard Jesus proclaiming the message, “[T]he kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’ (1: 15) This was a declaration of God’s ultimate authority which breaks down all barriers of fear, doubt, suffering, and even death such that nothing can separate us, those we love, or any corner of our world from God’s love. Last week we saw Jesus embodying that message by casting an “unclean spirit” out of a man in the Capernaum synagogue, thereby restoring this man’s relationship with himself, with his community and family, and with God.

In our passage today, the story of this “day in the life” of Jesus in Capernaum continues – and so does Jesus’ embodying of the message of the coming of the kingdom of God as he heals and casts out demons among the people of that city. Once again, Jesus is welcoming back into the community of the people of God those who have been put outside the boundaries of good society by disease or being labeled as demon-possessed.

Beyond these flashy, exciting scenes of crowds surrounding Jesus and their amazement at his words and deeds, there are some more subtle - but vitally important – lessons for us as we seek to follow Jesus.

Ironically, those lessons for our discipleship do not come from the four disciples named in our passage. The high point for John, James, Andrew, and Simon (whom Jesus is soon to rename Peter) is when they invite Jesus to Simon Peter’s house after a busy morning for Jesus at the synagogue. They take Jesus straight to Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, who is ill, and she becomes the first recipient of Jesus’ healing in the Gospel of Mark. Simon Peter’s mother-in-law’s response is to immediately get up and serve Jesus and the disciples.

I have to admit, that when I read this passage, my first response something to the effect of, “This is not exactly a prime example of feminist-liberation theology.” I mean, couldn’t Simon Peter himself have gotten Jesus a drink and a snack to eat while Jesus is attending to his mother-in-law? It seems like the men were all sitting around waiting for this sick woman to serve them. And the Gospel passage – at first blush – seems to support those stereotyped rolls.

It helps a little bit when you step back and realize that the function of the statement “and she began to serve them” was really meant to indicate that she had been restored to health and wholeness. But still, doesn’t the woman deserve a bit of a rest? I have to say that I can almost hear Simon Peter saying, “You’re well? That’s great! We really could use a snack.” Perhaps some of the mothers out there have heard some similarly not-so-sensitive lines.

But beneath that initial reaction there is something else going on here. While the male disciples don’t lift a finger, this woman, who moments ago was in bed with a fever, reacts to Jesus’ embodied expression of God’s love for her with gratitude – gratitude expressed in humble service. It is not the men who are models for our discipleship, for following Jesus – it is this simple woman. As Gary Charles writes, “This is no woman bowing to cultural convention and keeping in her restricted place as a servant; this is a disciple who quietly demonstrates the high honor of service for [all of] those who follow Jesus.”

Thus it is Simon Peter’s mother-in-law who gives us our first lesson in discipleship from our passage today. That lesson is that all of us are called to gratefully respond to God’s love made known to us in Jesus Christ, who humbled himself for our sake, by humbly serving others – and thus sharing God’s love.

It is from here that our passage moves quickly to the flash and glamour of the crowds around the door and the mass-healings. But just as quickly, our passage moves on to the next morning, when Jesus arose before sunrise and “went out to a deserted place” and prayed. (v. 35)

Yes, it seems even Jesus needed quiet prayer time alone with his heavenly Father - and, of course, so do we. That is our second lesson from this passage: that all of us need to spend time daily in prayer.

Why, you might ask, did Jesus need time alone with God the Father? Didn't he have the most direct of lines to heaven that he could use anytime? Well perhaps, like us, even Jesus needed time and space and quiet to really hear that "still, small voice of God." With so many people surrounding him now, perhaps their clamor made it impossible for Jesus to really connect with God the Father the way he needed to and stay focused on his greater purpose. So, too, do we need to take time away from phones, computers, radios, TV's, and all those people and things clamoring for our attention to get re-focused on what really matters.

Once again, it is ironic that the so-called disciples are the ones who seem to miss this important lesson of discipleship. They come and interrupt Jesus' time of quiet prayer demanding he get back to the clamoring crowds. It seems they are wide-eyed at their new-found popularity – at the crowds in their home-town flocking to see their man Jesus. It's understandable that they get caught up in all the excitement, but yet again, they miss what really matters.

And, that's exactly what Jesus says to them. It's not about popularity and fame, it's about spreading the message of God's love – of the kingdom of God. And so we have our final lesson from today's passage about discipleship: The life of discipleship is not about popular acclaim; it's about the message of Jesus.

We do not always spread the message of Jesus, the message of the kingdom of God, in ways that are seen by all and recognized and appreciated by all. We do not always spread the message of God's love through eloquent words of proclamation or through public works of reconciliation and social justice – though these ministries are, indeed, vitally important. Sometimes we spread the message through daily acts of discipleship that no one sees.

Underneath the glitz and glamour of the mass healings and exorcisms, this is the real message of our passage for us today. The call of discipleship in the way of Jesus involves not the adoration of crowds, but rather simple acts of spending time daily in prayer connecting with our loving God and simple acts of humble service. Our model for discipleship is not the popular preacher-healer surrounded by the big crowds, but Jesus alone in prayer and Simon Peter's mother-in-law rising from her sick bed to acts of humble service.

Friends as we seek to learn these lessons of true discipleship and follow Jesus as he heads off at the end of our passage to spread the message of the kingdom of God, let me offer to you the words of that well-known hymn, "There Is a Balm in Gilead." The wonderful third verse reads:

"If you cannot preach like Peter, If you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say, "He died for all."

Besides telling us that Simon Peter finally did learn a lesson from his mother-in-law, this is a wonderful verse in many other ways as well. If you'll grant me some poetic license, I'd like to end today by rephrasing that verse to speak even more directly to our theme today:

If you cannot be a famous disciple like Peter, if you cannot be a great evangelist like Paul, you can live a life of prayer and humble service that spreads the message of God's love for all.

In Jesus' name. Amen.