

Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-11, 20c

1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

One of the vivid memories I have of my childhood is that of my Mom and Dad watching Oral Roberts on television on Sunday afternoons. He reported that in 1947 God called him to heal people. For those of you who are as chronologically superior as I am may remember those healing crusades. He would travel with a large mobile tent that sat 3,000 on metal folding chairs. People with various infirmities would forward Oral Roberts, would place his palm on their foreheads, his fingers extended over their scalp, pushing hard he would pray, and then he would ask them questions about how they felt or what they were able to now do. Today you can see on television Benny Hinn at his faith healing summits. You may have heard about the gentleman who went to a church healing service, but was so unimpressed by the faith healer, he got out of his wheelchair and walked out. Today, in our gospel lesson, we read about Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law.

Last week we thought about Jesus casting the unclean spirit out of a man in the synagogue. Mark makes it clear that Jesus came to destroy the powers of evil and darkness Today's passage continues Jesus' battle against the darkness, this time healing Simon's mother-in-law. As soon as they left the synagogue—where Jesus cast out the unclean spirit—they last week—Jesus, Simon, and three other disciples go to Simon's house. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. When he was told about the woman, Jesus went "and took her by the hand lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." And then that that very evening, the people of the village brought their sick and demon-possessed to Jesus, and Jesus healed them all.

We live in a world full of people like the man with the unclean spirit and like Simon's mother-in-law, a world where many are hurting. Suffering abounds, the needs are overwhelming. The news as of late has been filled with brutality, cruelty and violence. The serial sexual abuse of young, female gymnasts, the torture of thirteen children by their own parents, another school shooting that has left students dead and lives shattered. The crowds are clamoring at the door, crying out for healing and help. All of the sexual harassment accusations that have brought many a prominent person down from their pedestals, politicians such as Al Franken and Roy Moore, those in the entertainment business such as Harvey Weinstein and Garrison Keillor, people in the media such as Bill O'Reilly and Matt Lauer. Their actions hurt people. Each week you name hurting and suffering people, before we lift those names up in prayer. There are countless people who need Jesus. And we need him too.

Jill Duffield, the editor of *Presbyterian outlook*, wrote, "No matter the setting, no matter the scene, Jesus will do what he has come to earth to do: proclaim the message, cast out demons, ease suffering, and defeat sin as disciples then and now scramble to pay attention and keep up." She goes on to add, "He is on a mission. A mission from God, no less, and all we can do is find him and follow." That is what discipleship means, following Christ. A life of discipleship is a ministry of healing.

One cannot dismiss as insignificant the number of times the Scriptures refer to touching. In the text, Jesus came and took Peter's mother-in-law by the hand. The fever left her. She was restored to health, to wholeness. Throughout both testaments—the angel who touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh; Jairus's daughter; the blind man whom Jesus "touched," and so forth—there is one incident after another pointing to the power

of touch. It might even be said that in Scripture touch is a metaphor for intimacy, for presence, for relationship. Some theologians even suggest that to be "created in the image of God" means that we are created for relationship, for "it is not right that human beings should be alone." One recent experiment was designed to test the efficacy of prayer on patients suffering from comparable illnesses. The members of one group, located on the east coast, were each assigned the name of an ill person on the west coast with whom they were not acquainted and instructed to pray every day for the person's health. The members of the other group were each given the name of an ill person whom they knew personally and who was a member of their own church. Similar instructions were given, to pray for the ill people every day. The patients who had no intimate relationship with their prayer partner showed no significant difference in improvement from the general public, whereas members of the group who had developed a social relationship with their prayer partners indicated a decided difference in improvement and quality of life. There is something healing about relationships, about touching.

One commentator, in referring to the power of touch, wrote that there is power in touch, in nearness, in intimacy to make people whole again. It looks as though Jesus understood that. Theologically speaking that is the reason for the incarnation. God knew human need for nearness. Jesus is the incarnation of God's love. Research seems to indicate that people in happy marriage relationships are healthier and live longer.

Thanks, Ramona!

Jill Duffield suggests that Mark's Gospel has a breathlessness to it - one scene quickly fades into another and another. That is a characteristic of Mark's gospel. We find the word "immediately" found at least 27 times in the gospel of Mark. That adverb refers to not only Jesus' actions, but the actions of others. We, Jesus' disciples, must keep alert, keep watching, because if we take our eyes off Jesus, if we succumb to any distraction, we might lose Jesus and have to go looking for him. We must go out into the darkness of people's lives, and we cannot waste any time! People need us now! They need our touch. They need our nearness. They need our relationship!

Let me conclude with an experience of another physician, Richard Selzer, who has written of the miracle of touch. "I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted—palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed ... to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut the little nerve. The young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private.... 'Will my mouth always be like this?' she asks. 'Yes,' I say, 'it will. It is because the nerve was cut.' She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. 'I like it,' he says. 'It is kind of cute.' He bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close that I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate her, to show her that their kiss still works.... I hold my breath and let the wonder in."

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us,
and blesses us with peace,
be all glory and honor forever. **Amen.**