

## Aren't We All In Need of Healing?

Sermon 89 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 7, 2021

Mark 1: 29-39

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark picks up right where last week left off. Jesus, followed by the four disciples he'd just pulled off the fishing boats, leaves the synagogue in Capernaum. In that synagogue, Jesus performed his first healing miracle in Mark's account: casting out a demon. From the synagogue, Jesus and the new disciples then go into the house of Simon and Andrew, where Simon's mother-in-law is in bed, sick with fever.

Unlike the exorcism text from last week, this story sounds like something we can relate to, something we can easily understand. After all, we have *all* been in the bed, sick with fever at one point or another. But in the ancient world things were a little different. Then, illness could have a catastrophic impact on the household economy. Everyone had their roles and responsibilities to manage, they were all part of an intricate web of mutuality. Men found work outside the home, earning money to provide for the family's needs. You may remember Simon and Andrew were fishing with their father when Jesus called them in from the boats. The women had just as much responsibility with their work at home: tending to the children, the wash, the food, and sometimes even the farm. When anyone was sick, to the point of being stuck in bed, an important link in that web was missing; the whole household suffered.

Illness and disease also carried social and religious consequences for those who were sick. They were considered impure and unclean, therefore excluded from sacred spaces and the communal worship of God. Isolation could quickly set in as the infirm were unable to perform their familial responsibilities and at the same time, they were cut off from their religious communities.

This combination of conditions created a dual-diagnosis of sorts. Biblical Scholar John Pilch wrote about this in 1985 saying:

*Ethnomedicine places primacy on the culturally constructed causes of illness... in contrast, biomedicine places primary emphasis on biological symptoms and pathogens... Disease derives from a biomedical perspective... disease affects individuals... Illness inevitably affects others: the significant other, the family, the neighborhood, the village...*

*Jesus and all healers of the period could only perceive illness and not diseases... Notice in each healing instance the almost total disregard of symptoms (something very essential to disease). Instead, there is constant concern for meaning... Jesus' activity is best described... as healing, not as curing. He provides social meaning for the life problems resulting from the sickness... <sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Pilch in Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man*. p. 148. Original source is a paper written by John Pilch, "Healing in Mark: A Social Analysis" Nov. 1, 1985. retrieved: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/014610798501500404>

To use Pilch's language, Simon Peter's mother-in-law was both suffering from disease and illness. She had a medical problem and a socio-cultural condition. Both needed healing.

Until recently, that kind of situation would have been difficult for many of us to imagine. Since the first century, we have learned about the causes of our sicknesses and we have (for the most part) concluded that our physical maladies are not always direct consequences of our personal spiritual piety. Despite the temporary setback of a cold or stomach bug, we have become accustomed to (perhaps now we might even say 'spoiled by') the endless opportunities we have to do our jobs, to function in society, and to engage with our friends and family members at will. But this pandemic has taught us a little something about the dual diagnosis of disease and illness, hasn't it?

If we didn't know it before, now we know that our bodies are not immortal or immune from the things that threaten our health. There are germs, bacteria, and viruses that we carry and spread causing tremendous amounts of harm to ourselves and to others. So we have taken efforts to isolate ourselves, to wear masks, and stay socially distanced from one another.

If we didn't know it before, now we know that prolonged periods of being alone and at home can make us feel like we aren't ourselves... that kind of isolation can make us act out in all kinds of ways.

Until recently, we might have struggled to understand the dual nature of the disease and illness that kept Simon's mother-in-law sick in bed. But now, we can begin to understand because we, too, are in need of both kinds of healing: healing that might come in the form of a vaccine *and* healing that might come as our church begins to re-gather.

We certainly are a people in need of healing.

When Jesus enters the house of Simon and Andrew, he immediately learns that Simon's mother-in-law is sick in bed. I wonder if they told Jesus about her to explain why she wasn't there to greet them at the door, or maybe to explain why the other women seemed to be a little flustered trying to prepare to receive their guest. I wonder how long she'd been bed-ridden and ill? Did the fever come on that morning or had she been out for days? weeks? months?

No matter the answers to questions such as these, Mark tells us that with no regard for purity or privacy, Jesus immediately goes over to her, reaches out, takes her hand, and lifts her up. This is the first time in Mark's Gospel that the Greek word for "lifted up" appears, and it's the same word Mark will use later to describe Jesus' resurrection from the tomb. Perhaps the author is trying to imply that this woman is experiencing her own resurrection of sorts as she is transformed from a sick woman, in bed with fever to one who has been healed and called a servant of Christ.

On March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016 a campaign rally was held in Fayetteville, North Carolina. The event was disrupted by protestors until finally law enforcement officers had to lead protesters away. As they did, a seventy-nine year old white man, named John McGraw, who had come to attend the rally stepped out from the crowd and punched one of the detained protestors, a black man named Rakeem Jones, in the face. “After the incident McGraw said on video: ‘He deserved it... The next time we see him we might have to kill him... we don’t know who he is. He might be with a terrorist organization.’”<sup>2</sup>

McGraw was arrested and charged with assault; and the next time the two men saw one another was months later in court. McGraw did not contest the charges and he apologized after the legal proceedings, saying to Jones: “If I met you in the street and the same thing occurred, I would have said, ‘Go on home. Or one of us will get hurt. That’s what I would have said. But we are caught up in a political mess today, and you and me, we got to heal our country.’”<sup>3</sup> Later, at Rakeem Jones’s request, the two men met for lunch and began the long and utterly relational process of healing.

Rakeem Jones and John McGraw suffered from a common illness that is wrecking havoc in our world today. They were ill with politics, and ill with socio-economic differences. They were ill with the lie that our society can only thrive when we exclude and evict our neighbors. They were ill with racism. They were ill with hatred. They were ill with prejudice and self-righteousness. They were ill with anger. They were ill with fear... They were so completely ill with all kinds of conditions that kept them quarantined and separated from one another.

Fortunately what McGraw and Jones learned throughout this eye-opening experience was that the only way to heal, was to draw closer to one another – not in anger and violence – but in love. Bishop Michael Curry says it best, “There’s one thing that we can all be sure of: Whatever the future holds, it will be shared. We’ll live together as family or perish as fools.”<sup>4</sup>

This fateful encounter between Jones and McGraw happened nearly 5 years ago and it pains me to say this, but I don’t think a whole lot of improvement has happened since that day in 2016. We have continued to pick and tear one another apart, allowing superficial arguments over small points of difference ruin relationships and deepen divides that exist between ourselves and our neighbors. Yes, I’m talking about a political reality, a political problem, but as Christians living in the United States of America in 2021, it is time to admit that we have allowed these external divisions of politics and political ideologies to tear apart our churches just as much as they are tearing apart our society.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Curry, *Love is the Way*. p 207. The story about John McGraw and Rakeem Jones is found in Curry’s book, Chapter 10, “The Great Relationship Revival.”

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 208.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 209.

We started this journey in January remembering who we are and whose we are: we are God's beloved children and we are followers of Jesus, disciples of the risen Christ, who taught us *how* to live in peace with one another. We begin with accepting the blessing of God's belovedness, we say yes to the call that God has upon our lives, the call to love and service of our neighbors. We call out and cast out the demons that breed false teachings about who we are, lies that rip at our souls from the inside out, together we say "no" to all that is unclean within us and among us. And then we get to the work of healing: healing those who are sick with bodily illness and those who are suffering societal ills. That is our work, that is our story, that is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

After Jesus heals the woman in Mark, chapter 1, she gets up and begins to serve those around her. This is the first time that Mark has described anybody's actions with that word "serve" and he will later build upon it, using it to define the work of the disciples and deacons. The woman's service makes her the first deacon in the Gospel of Mark. She sets the tone for what the other followers will do and become. Followers of Christ, servants of others, waiters of the tables that bring people together.

After the word gets out that Jesus is casting out demons and healing the sick, others from the town begin to show up, in search of their own healing. Soon the whole town has gathered and Jesus heals them too, casting out demons and healing the sick.

Often we read these stories about how Jesus healed the sick and we think only about our physical bodies. We think about the flu or the stomach bug. But there's another kind of activity happening with Jesus' healing work in Capernaum. People are coming together, relationships are being restored, those who were cut off and isolated because of ideas about purity and piety are brought back in, lifted up, and set free from the burden of their illnesses.

It's no wonder the crowds started to grow and *everyone* went searching for Jesus. He was healing them *all* in ways they didn't even realize healing was possible.

Perhaps we are more like them than we realize.

Maybe we are in need of medicine and a vaccine to heal our biological sickness, but I think we are in need of a savior who can heal our relational illness as well.

Michael Curry says that "We need a revival of relationships, of human relationships across difference – difference of religion, difference of ethnicity, difference of political ideology. And as former secretary of state Madeleine Albright has said, 'Instead of conspiring with the like-minded, we need to spend more time learning from those we consider wrong-headed.'"<sup>5</sup>

As Christians, followers of Jesus, disciples of Christ, we already know just how to do this. We do it on a regular basis when we gather around our communion tables. We sit down

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 222.

together, we give thanks for the simple meal of bread and drink, and we pass the elements to one another – not worrying about all that we have to disagree about, but focusing on all that we share in common.

The scripture says that the sick woman was lifted up from her illness, she was resurrected from her old life and transformed into something new: a servant of God, a disciple of Christ, a deacon in Christ's church... an agent of love, a source of healing, a prophet of wholeness in a world that was aching for it.

What do we need to be saved and lifted up from today?

What kind of healing do we need?

Could it start right now – as we receive the bread and drink from Christ's table?