

“INTO THE FRAY”

Mark 1:29-39

February 4, 2024

Rev. Jerry Duggins

Reading the Bible can be a very humbling experience. There are Paul's lengthy and convoluted sentences, unpronounceable names, unfamiliar cultural practices, inexplicable violence, and just plain odd stories. With Mark, the problem is a deceptive simplicity. It seems like a straightforward narrative, but each scene leaves us with more questions.

Last week, we read about Jesus teaching in the synagogue. The crowds marvel at his words, calling them “a new teaching.” But the only words recorded in the episode are addressed to the unclean spirit: “Be silent, and come out of him!” What is this new teaching? Why silence the demon? For content, we had to go back to the previous episode, where Jesus proclaims the nearness of God and calls his first disciples to follow him. I ended up following the lead of one commentator who suggested that the combination of teaching with action were invitations for his followers to “enter the fray.” Mark's gospel then becomes the story of what it looks like to “enter the fray.”

In today's story, we, again, have a straightforward narrative. From the synagogue, Jesus goes with his disciples to Simon and Andrew's house, where he is alerted to their mother-in-law's illness. He approaches, takes her by the hand, lifts her up. The fever leaves and she begins to serve her guests. No words are spoken. Somehow the whole town hears about the healing and shows up at the door. Jesus cures many of them, casts out demons denying them permission to speak. He gets up the next morning, finds a deserted place and prays until Simon and his companions find him. They seem to rebuke him, which he ignores, and says, “Let's get going.”

Is this what it looks like to enter the fray? Is the content of the new teaching unfolding before our eyes? The sparsity of detail just leaves us hanging. The first time I read this last week, I thought there wasn't much in this story, at least not for a captivating sermon. As I read other commentary, I was becoming convinced, as one writer after another added things to the text that weren't there. One person suggested that Jesus was healing for days and had grown weary. Prayer was a place to escape and recharge. Another suggested that one take away was that Jesus was “not absent in sickness and death but in the midst of it.” True enough, but there's no death in this story. He also wrote “within the staccato pace of gospel proclamation and ministry, Jesus seeks out a moment of quiet rest” (p.49). I like that phrase “staccato pace.” It's a great description of Mark's gospel, but there's no indication that Jesus is tired, and no reason to suggest that his prayer was about rest. In the history of Christian spirituality, prayer is often described as a struggle.

In fairness to these writers, it's hard for us not to add things to biblical stories. We want to know what a character is thinking or feeling. We want to know about motivation. Above all, stories should be interesting!

But if we resist the temptation to “spice this one up,” some interesting questions do begin to emerge. Why isn’t there more drama around the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law and why do healings later in the gospel become more complicated? What do we make of the movement from ill with a fever directly to “service?” And what can we make of the mention of Jesus praying at this point in the story?

Let’s take the healing first. It just seems to flow. First Jesus comes near, the Greek word intentionally recalling Jesus’ message that the kingdom of God has come near. Then he touches her, creating a connection. He raises her up; that Greek word is the same used in reference to his own resurrection at the end of the Gospel. And health just happens. Natural, ordinary. This is how life is supposed to be in God’s world. But as people begin to challenge Jesus, to think that maybe the source of his power is more demonic than divine, the healings seem to require more work, as if the resistance to Jesus’ message slows it down, as if it’s possible to get in the way.

As proclaimers of good news, announcers of God’s nearness, Jesus’ followers must have encountered similar resistance. As long as our message is about God’s desire for our health or about freedom from those things that enslave us, things go smoothly, but as soon as we start talking about taking up one’s cross, about making sacrifices for others, resistance does slow us down. Entering the fray begins well, but the story that Mark’s gospel tells us is that it gets harder. Welcoming God is easy. Walking by the spirit, not so much.

She is healed for “service.” Now we may bristle at their mother-in-law immediately returning to what we think of as traditional women’s work. We may wonder why she isn’t invited to sit at Jesus’ feet to learn of his ways. The feminist in us wants to object, but it really isn’t “women’s work” that she’s healed for; it’s the work of hospitality, a ministry embraced by the early church, a ministry essential to the thriving community. Again the Greek word here is used for the ministry of the diaconate. The word literally means to dust off. Maybe a little house-cleaning lay in her future. In any case, as we follow Jesus in Mark’s gospel, we’ll learn that service isn’t just women’s work and it isn’t always as gentle as setting out refreshments.

So healing and hospitality, told in a matter of fact, don’t get too excited manner. The divine presence enters into the common and ordinary stuff of life. If you’re looking for drama for unexpected transformation, for a story to amaze; it’s not this story.

Jesus isn’t worn out and drained from days of healing people. He doesn’t flee to the wilderness for a quiet moment of prayer to recharge his batteries. He simply gets up early, as I imagine was his custom. He finds a quiet place, and he prays. We don’t know what he prays or why he prays. He’s probably not the introvert who needs his time alone to function well. Prayer is just what he does. It’s a part of his ordinary life. It’s not a place he goes to only when he feels stressed. It’s something he does... well... just because God is near.

Prayer is probably what we ought to do not because someone needs praying for, not because we're tired and worn out, and not because we're feeling stressed. Those are all good times to pray, but mostly prayer is just a good reminder that God is near. And if prayer isn't a part of our ordinary lives, it's not going to do us much good when life becomes more complicated, when the resistance to the gospel builds, when service becomes more demanding.

It's early days in the journey of faith. A focus on God's presence in ordinary things, as it turns out, will be crucial for following Jesus on more difficult days. It was on the night of his arrest, after all, when Jesus took ordinary bread and ordinary wine and consecrated a meal by which we remember him and celebrate his love. Amen.