

8 February 2009

Last week's story about the man with the unclean spirit begins a whole series of healing stories. In all we'll have four healing stories, not to mention the crowds of people that just show up as if Jesus is some kind of miracle med clinic. These stories can be hard for us moderns to hear because these healings do look so much like miracles. It's easy for us to get distracted by that. We try to find modern, scientific-sounding explanations, like that the demons were really mental illnesses, although that still doesn't explain how Jesus healed them. In various ways we try to make sense of these miracles, to make them sensible, but in focusing so much on the miraculous part, we risk losing sense of the meaning, of what is actually happening. The fact that it's the nature of the lectionary to chop these stories up into bite-sized chunks doesn't really help.

So let's recap the story again: Jesus has been baptized by John and has begun his ministry. He showed up at the synagogue last week to preach, and he blew his audience away. He healed a man of an unclean spirit, and we saw how this was more than just a miracle cure for a mental illness, it is about the liberation of our minds, how Jesus' teaching sets people free. But the crowds in Jesus' day were just like people today and they got distracted by the miracles. Last week's passage ended saying, "At once his fame spread everywhere."

Today we begin, "And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew." It's interesting, in my research I've learned that excavations in Capernaum have turned up the ruins of a first-century synagogue, with a house compound built right against the wall. Archeologists are almost certain this really was Simon Peter's house, so when Mark says he immediately left the synagogue and entered the house, he really means it! But that detail is interesting. It shows Jesus moving from this grand public spectacle right into the privacy of someone's home. Simon's and Andrew's home, the two guys he'd only just met a few verses ago. I bet Simon was tickled pink to have his new charismatic friend get so immediately famous and then come stay in his house. Score!

It also seems that Simon's mother-in-law was sick, and they tell Jesus about it. Maybe having just seen him cast out that demon, they figure he can do something for her. At any rate, she doesn't sound desperately ill, just a fever, although in the days before aspirin and antibiotics, even a fever could become something pretty serious. Nevertheless, Jesus' cure is very simple and unspectacular compared to the hullabaloo with the demon. He just takes her hand, and the fever leaves her, and she serves them. It's all over and done with in just two sentences. It's easy to miss it. But this little story tells us something very important about the meaning of these healings. Namely, that we aren't healed solely for our own good. We are healed for a purpose. We are healed so that we might serve others.

If anything is going to stick in the modern craw more than miracles, it's service. Depending on how you read this story, it could really make you mad. Simon inviting Jesus to his house and apologizing, "I'd offer you some coffee and finger sandwiches, but the mother-in-law is sick." As if men can't fend for themselves, and isn't that an age old story? And Jesus saying, "Well, we can't have that," so he heals her and she pops right into the kitchen saying, "While I'm up, do you have any tunics that need ironing?" Aaargghh!! It's enough to drive a feminist insane!

Especially us in the UCC. We tend to be very big on liberation, and we even like miracle healings if they're interpreted from a social justice angle. We dig the social justice! "AIDS is the modern leprosy!" Our United Church Press publishes tons of books by and about people who have been labeled unclean, unholy, or in other ways wanting, and the gospel is all about reaching out to these people and declaring them clean just as they are, liberating them from society's sin of prejudice and oppression – and I agree with that. I am totally there. But all too often that's where it stops, with that liberation, as if the whole point of the gospel is what we might call self-actualization, realizing human potential, mere acceptance, even affirmation of people just as they are. It's important, yes. But seriously, what's so gospel about that? Is the gospel nothing more than "I'm OK, you're OK"? "You and me are free to be you and me"?

But there IS more. We are not just saved *from* something; we are saved *for* something. We are saved so that we may become disciples. We are saved so that we may live the kingdom of heaven. And the hallmark of this new life, Jesus says, is service. In a crass sense, we shake off society's chains so that we may take on God's chains. We shake off society's service so that we may take on God's service. Again, to quote Jesus, "Call no one master, for you have one master who is in heaven." But this is hard for us to hear. Not only in the UCC but for American Christians in general. We hate the notion of servant hood. Volunteering your extra time and money to charity is one thing, but a life of service, of servant hood? It sounds too much like oppression. Aren't women, aren't people of color, aren't all kinds of groups always being told to mind their place and serve those higher on the totem pole? We can't be for that!

There's another interesting stigma attached to service, though. Think about the kind of people who are in need of services, especially social services. The homeless, the poor, the drug addicts, the disabled. People in need. They are in need of services, and let's be honest, don't we kind of look down on them? Sure, we're supposed to have compassion, pity, and charity for them. But isn't there a bit of scorn, too? That these people aren't smart enough, disciplined enough, competent enough to take care of themselves? Otherwise they wouldn't be in need of service. None of us would ever want to be among their ranks, and if we have been, we'd prefer to forget about it because it's degrading. Degrading, condescending, humiliating. If you've ever volunteered at a food pantry or a homeless shelter, you've surely seen it, not only how the system treats people like unwashed cattle, but also how those doing the serving, the volunteers – not any of you, of course, but others! – are just a little bit smug and superior? Do you ever get the feeling that these poor, destitute people are there to make the volunteers feel good? I get to put this on my resume: "volunteers weekly with Meals on Wheels."

So this whole service thing is problematic. And yet there's also something to be said for it, that what all of us really want is to serve, not to be served. That somehow what makes us truly human is to serve others. Because which side of the soup table would we rather be on? And some social programs take that into account, in which those who are served are also called upon to serve: like Habitat for Humanity, which expects recipients to put in donor hours, or shelters that ask guests to help out with tasks, or soup kitchens where the folks preparing the meal are the very folks who have come for the food. There's dignity in being on the serving end, of being the one to offer a helping hand to a brother or sister in need.

And that little nugget of truth is what lies at the heart of the gospel Jesus preached. It's what Jesus was. Jesus is the model of true humanity and true divinity through servant hood. It's Philippians 2 all over again. He was God, he was Lord, but he didn't see that as reason to lord it over us. He descended to earth but didn't condescend. He came out of compassion, not charity or pity. He served us because he loved us, because he felt more complete when he was with us in the trenches, when we were helping each other to stand. Jesus, helping Simon's mother-in-law by the simple gesture of taking her hand. She in turn, in that same feeling, served him – out of gratitude or out of fellow feeling? He restored her humanity, and she shared her humanity with him and with the others.

Seen through gospel eyes then, any service that is involuntary, any service that is meant to degrade, any service that is condescending, that is either self-effacing through humiliation or self-aggrandizing out of hubris – any such service is slavery. Such service is sin.

But through Jesus we are freed from that kind of slavery for true service, service that is empowering, that dignifies. Service that isn't between haves and have-nots, but between equals. Service that is reciprocal and mutual. That kind of service is what the gospel is all about. That kind of service is liberating. That kind of service is the way we find our true humanity and are even made divine.