

First Presbyterian Church of Watertown

Mark 1.29-34
"The Demons Knew Him"
The Rev. Dr. Fred G. Garry
October 8, 2107

I spoke to my physician at a graveside service. We talked about compliance. Compliance is how medical people describe the likelihood that you and I will follow their directions. Will we actually take the meds they proscribe; do the exercises recommended; stop eating massive amounts of meat and processed food. If we take their direction, we are compliant.

It just so happened that my annual physical was a few days away so I said, "okay, you have four days to decide." Collins Kellogg looked at me a bit confused. "Four days from now you will look at my blood work and say, a few things are elevated but not enough to medicate. You will suggest I need to lose some weight. And you will recommend changing my diet and adding more exercise."

Collins gave me a look that suggested many things I shouldn't say in the pulpit so I continued. "You need to choose: diet or exercise. I won't change both at the same time. One major change a year. On Tuesday, you choose."

Tuesday rolled around and Collins said, my blood work has a couple of elevations, but they don't need medication. I need to lose some weight. And then he crossed his arms and put his head down. "Diet," he said. "I choose diet." "Diet it is," I replied and it has been. Small steps yes; but since August I have begun to modify my diet more and more.

You have heard me say this many times, I am a broken record, but I really like the song: it is not what you know, it is what you can do. I know the parts of my life that I would like to change, the places where I would like to be healed, freed. You know the parts of your life that you would like to change, the places of your life where you would like to be healed. We know it, but we don't do it. It is not a question of knowing; it is a question of having the power to change our lives. For the most part we know what we want to change, but we lack the will, the power.

Our reading from Mark today is about the power of change. Jesus has the power to heal, to change life from broken to whole. What is intriguing here is how and where he brings this power to bear and his repeated demand for silence. This is the teaching we need to learn: how and where does Jesus heal and why does he want to silence the demons? And we should ask also, why does Mark records this, why tells this story? If we can answer these, we may have a light to shed on change and the power we need to be free.

In the last few weeks I have encouraged you to consider that Mark wrote to an early church who believed in a cosmic Jesus who will do battle in the sky, the kings of kings, the savior of the world, the one who reconciles us with God and gives us eternal life. It is as if Mark wants to bring this cosmic Jesus down to earth, but as we saw last week and in the desert and the baptism and testimony of the Baptist, the earthly Jesus has power. It is just not in the sky so much. You don't get much more down to earth than healing Simon's mother-in-law so she can make dinner. Mark says, "he took her hand."

The cosmic Jesus of the sky is hanging around the seashore, showing up unannounced it would appear for dinner. There is a mundane picture of life and yet there is healing power and demons and forbidden declarations about Jesus be the "the Holy One." In the mundane there is power and there is demand for silence.

I joked with Casey this week that the two important parts of our passage today, healing power and silence, are not taught at the seminary. There is no class called, "healing 101: how to anoint and restore." And there are no classes, no seminars, no courses on silence. Lots of classes on talking. They teach you how to speak, to proclaim, to pray, to argue, to shout even, but no classes on the power of silent meditation, the art of not speaking, the beauty of listening. Casey suggested while there are no classes on healing they do offer classes on funerals.

There are no classes on healing and silence and that is good. It is good because that is not the job of the seminary; that is the job of the church. You are the place where pastors are given the opportunity to learn what it means to heal and what it means to find the humility of silence.

I got my first lesson on healing in my first week as a pastor. A family needed a Presbyterian to pray with their mother in the hospital. I was called in and came to the bedside. The family asked me to pray that their mother would die. She was suffering; her life was over; they wanted her to be free from suffering.

This was not my first thought, my assumption going in. When I walked to the bedside, I thought they were going to ask for a miracle, that I pray for healing, that she would be miraculously restored to health. What I learned in my first lesson about healing was that I didn't really understand what people needed. They had a better understanding of healing than I did. The limits of life were clear to them; they knew that life had already been whole. The measure of grace was clear; to seek more would be ingratitude.

The theologian Paul Tillich made this point when he said, all the people Jesus healed eventually died. When Jesus wept over Lazarus, he wept because he was bringing him back to a life of suffering. Jesus, Tillich suggested, didn't offer the people of Galilee the fountain of youth or life everlasting here and now. Peter's mother-in-law died later on. She was healed of her fever today, true; she was given more time, better time, perhaps. But not all time, not endless freedom.

In the years since that first week, you and others have taught me a great deal about healing. Many times I have had the privilege to pray, gather this one to you, O Lord. Call to your child and bring them home. I have held the hand of the dying.

The cosmic Jesus in the sky doesn't really bring this message. The earthly Jesus holding the hand of a fevering woman does. Jesus is not promising a healing to come, a freedom in the sky, a transcendent vision of life eternal. He freed a woman who served dinner at a house on a lakeshore. Mark is introducing a different vision of Jesus. And with the vision comes a question: Is the church living like Jesus at Simon's house? Are we walking a humble path?

In 2008, during our summer sabbatical in Malawi, I was given a hard lesson about silence. It is one of those moments that linger with me, continue to challenge and train my impulse to speak. As a family were walking through the dambo (the swampy dump) of Mzuzu, the place where the poorest of the poor suffer through life. We came to a house where a young girl lived. My daughters had sung with this girl the night before in a church choir.

Her grandmother greeted us at the door and told us this fourteen year old girl could not come out and speak to us because she died last night. At first we hoped this was some sort of translation mix up. Died? Impossible. We saw her last night; heard her sing last night. Was she in an accident? No. The grandmother said. She got sick and she died. It was so impossible to imagine yet spoken of as if so possible by the grandmother. People get sick and they die.

For the better part of five years, I studied all things death and dying, I read all the books, ingested all the material, wrote the insights down and finished the course and got the degree. My conclusions and determinations were about speaking: the good words we say when people die, eulogies, tributes. I did my best to document and describe the good that comes from good words. Outside the hut there were no words; there nothing to say. A child got sick; she died. This happens.

I still talk too much, but I am learning silence, learning to listen. Again, I took all the courses, read all the books about talking didn't prepare me for a moment in life, in missions, in ministry to be quiet. I pay attention now, more and more, when Jesus says, don't speak.

Our passage today wants us to look at the brokenness of life, the compassion Jesus shows, he healed many. And there is also this reoccurring theme: we need to be quiet, to listen more than we speak. We are not demons, I know. Yet, I can't help but feel we are too often ready to speak about Jesus. We are ready to speak about justice and truth and how things should be. We are readier to speak than we are to live like Jesus.

There is a call here in our passage to heal many, to cast out demons, to be in the earth. Jesus has power to heal, but he is not very cosmic. He is in the here and now holding the hand of one with a fever. This is an image of what Mark believes we should live, the church we should be, the power we should have and offer to each other.

We all know the parts of our life that need to change. I am working on diet right now. I have discovered the joy of the fruit smoothie. Love it. I am pretty sure it is healthy. In the next year, progress will be made, greater health will be achieved. This will make Collins Kellogg happy that I was compliant. And Kathy has told me she is not ready for me to transition to eternal life. Yet, all of this is really a prelude to the real changes that must happen.

I need to live more and more like Jesus. I need to continue to remove the impulse and justification of anger; I need to remove the wrong desires and greed that still infects my heart; I need to continue to challenge false confidence and arrogance; I need to lose my readiness to discard people. And if I am really lucky I can even make my way to leave aside vengeance and all forms of hatred. If I am lucky.

Each one of these requires a lot of power. Yet, it also requires humility and the attention silence can bring. I want freedom, but will I seek freedom in meekness or in the demands I make? I want faith, hope, and love to define my life, but will I listen, will I stop speaking long enough to know what faith, hope and love have to say? I want generosity and forgiveness to guide me, to become my impulse, but will I have the courage to live in the moment, here and now?

All of these questions are safe with the cosmic Jesus. If we are talking about faith as a trust of the eternal . . . no problem. If we are talking about how lowly I am when compared to the transcendent Jesus, well of course. And Jesus has reconciled us with the father in heaven. The cosmic level is really safe. But when you have to trust here and now, when the bills have to be paid, when the tests from the doctor are not what you expected, when you are ready to offer wrath not mercy, well, not so easy.

About twenty years ago, Kathy left aside the cosmic struggle of giving. Instead of trying to consider generosity or how we need to be thankful, Kathy and I began moving toward tithing. It wasn't easy, but it was real. It certainly wasn't sensible given the number of children we have; but it changed life for the better. Tithing wasn't the answer to every question or remedy to every problem. It was though a healing. It broke the fever so we could serve. It gave us a connection to faith and the earth that was real. And it created a kind of silence. There was an answer to the question and we could move on. We still talk about money, just not giving.

This may not be your challenge or the lesson you need in your life right now. But once a year we make a point of asking the question: will you walk toward freedom? Do you want to be healed? Would like to enjoy the silence of an answer? We struggle here. Many need to be healed, freed here. If you do, take a basic, honest step toward a tithe.

Whatever step you take or consider, make your step a simple act of devotion. Live like Jesus of Galilee. Find the power of living faith. Amen.