

Sermon Text: Mark 1:29-39

I want you to picture this gospel reading. Jesus healed a few people, and at once, of course, his fame began to spread. Simon and Andrew and James and John entered the house of Simon's mother-in-law, who was in bed with a fever. Now, Peter and his mother-in-law lived by the code of Middle Eastern hospitality. It was a matter of life and death to provide shelter and water and food to any traveling stranger. So it was Peter's mother-in-law's heart's desire to host this now famous guest, this young hotshot rabbi and healer named Jesus. The biggest honor to come her way in years! It would be for us a time to bring out the good china and the good silverware you haven't used since the wedding. It was an honor and a duty, and here she lay ill with a fever! Now, you think plaques on historic houses, some of them say, "George Washington slept here." Imagine the story that Peter's mother-in-law would have, "You know Jesus came by my house. He ate at my table. He seemed to enjoy my cooking, but I had a fever and missed the whole thing." What Peter's mother-in-law wanted to do, more than anything else was to get up and serve her guest. She was healed not as a convenience for Jesus and the boys. She was healed so she could serve, as was her heart's desire, to serve in the life-giving hospitality of the day and because it was an honor for her to have the rabbi of great repute visit in her home, at her table. She used her restored health to serve and honor Jesus in her home. She used her restored health to serve and honor Jesus in her home.

Now, I'll never forget a TV story that I saw, sort of a documentary, several years ago, years ago, I don't know how long ago, but I do remember it made an impression. There was a man there from Las Vegas, who had abused his body, and he needed a heart transplant, and he got one. Now, try and think back then, it was when transplants were big news. It seemed, and I hate to use this word, but it is what he was, it seemed before the transplant, he had been a pimp. After the transplant, he was a healthy pimp, dealing in vice, degrading himself and women and others for profit.

A healed, whole body is nothing if your heart and mind and soul aren't changed towards serving God and serving others. A selfish, lonely life, broken in soul, can reside within a physical body that appears to be whole. Jesus healed a few people, and that night, the whole city gathered around his doors. In the morning, while it was still dark, he got up, and he went out to a deserted place. He went away, and there he prayed. Simon and his companions hunted for him. They said, "Jesus, everybody is looking for you!" The implied question was, "What's going on?" His answer, "Let's move on. Let's go to the neighboring town, and the neighboring town so that I may proclaim the good news because that is what I came to do!" There is more to life than a healthy body and a beating heart.

We used to live across the street from a beautiful teenage girl, and she would baby-sit for our children from time to time. We knew her well. She did well in school. She was not a behavior problem. She was a popular girl, and if health and beauty and youth are the most desirable qualities, then she should have been the most satisfied, happiest person around. Should have been! In spite of having everything everyone seems to want, she

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was miserable, and she did not believe that she was beautiful enough. She did not believe that she was popular enough. She did not believe that she was good enough. She did not believe any of the positive things about herself. So to become more beautiful, she thought she had to be thinner and thinner, and she ate almost nothing, and she purged what she did eat. When I saw her in the hospital, she told me that she used to get up in the middle of the night to exercise, to run in place, and to do push ups and to do sit ups until she fell exhausted into the bed. There are people who live a very long time, and have money, and have good looks, and appear to have friends and possessions and successes and trophies in the case and awards on the walls, and inside they are miserable and alone. There is more to life than the years between birth and death.

Jesus healed some of the people, and the crowds mobbed Him so that He could not preach, could not share God’s word in that town, could not offer spiritual healing of soul, could not offer meaning, could not offer acceptance, could not offer compassion and connection with God and with others. They wanted from Him only healed bodies. Healed bodies eventually die anyway. He wanted to preach God’s hope. He wanted to offer more! Healing was merely a sign that God’s Kingdom had come. Healing was merely a sign of who Jesus was. Forgiveness and grace and love and relationship forever is what He came to preach, and in that concept, remember Jesus’ odd words later on in Mark to the paralytic, whose friends lowered him down through the roof. You remember when Jesus saw him, the first thing He said was, “Your sins are forgiven.” Everybody stared at him, and then Jesus asked, making my point, “Which is easiest to say, your sins are forgiven or stand up and walk?” but so that you may know that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sin, he said to the paralytic, “Stand up and take your bed and go home.” You see the healing, and Jesus made it clear, was just a sign. The forgiveness was the main thing, and the authority that He had, the authority of God.

Externals cannot make you happy or whole. Scripture calls externals things of dust and rust and decay. I want to remind you, though it is unpleasant to think about, our bodies fall into that category. Our bodies also are things of dust and rust and decay. Unlike possessions and fame, there is something of us that lasts, something of us, which is meant to be with God forever. You can appear to be successful and popular and contented and appear to have a fulfilled life, but on the inside still be empty and filled with despair and alone.

When Jesus was mobbed by the crowd to have their bunions healed, their headaches or their hangnails or more serious conditions, He slipped away in darkness, and He went off to pray. Jesus had compassion on the people, but His compassion ran deeper than their physical needs. I cannot explain or understand why some people go through such physical pain, tremendous physical pain. I cannot explain or understand why some people are faced with degenerative diseases that linger decades and end in death. I can understand and I do know that we all end in death. What seems to matter to God is what we do with our life. What matters to God is what we do with our life, and not just in terms of money made or fame attained or how old we can be and still look young. Apparently God has something more in mind for a successful life. The key of what Jesus

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came to do was preaching the word, and the word was that God wants a relationship with us. The word is our sin cannot stand in the way. God’s love is greater than our despair. God’s love is the one thing, which can enable us to truly love ourselves and love our neighbors, forgive ourselves and forgive our neighbor. God’s word was made flesh in Jesus Christ.

When the crowd came around looking for physical healing, Jesus did some in order to gather a crowd, in order to preach the word, God’s love, God’s word, which is what we really need for the healing of our souls. He seemed to be tired of this sideshow of superficial healing of bodies, when he could see into everyone’s hearts and minds and souls the despair, the disconnection, the emptiness, the brokenness, the loneliness that can reside even in the healthiest of bodies. I believe it is for that reason that he slipped away. He slipped away from the crowd to pray, to pray and recharge, to recharge so that he could move on to the next town to preach. He preached the love of God, the gospel of forgiveness and acceptance to sinners, healing temporary ailments of people’s temporary bodies was secondary when eternal souls were broken on the ground.

Jesus went away and prayed just as He went away and prayed after being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. He went away and prayed because fame was not what He came for! Merely meeting physical needs was not what He came for!

We could set up a mighty military state with forced labor camps, and everybody’s needs would be met more or less, and some may even project that would be an earthly paradise, but anyone who thinks that makes the same mistake the mob made when they drove Jesus away to pray. There is something more to us than our physical needs, and even if we suffer illness, and even if God does heal our illness, our souls, our spiritual selves may remain broken and empty and alone.

I’m worried about the younger generation. I’m almost 50. I’m at that age where I can say younger generation. I’m an old codger now. I am worried about the younger generation. They’re being told constantly that if you look like this, if you dress like this, if you pierce like this, if you tattoo like this, if you display your body like this, wear your pants like this, listen to this kind of music at this volume, drive this kind of car, have this kind of hairstyle, then you will be happy. None of that is true! Just as my former babysitter found out. All the messages from all the people from all the different sellers of all the products and services and goods and makeup and clothing are doing nothing but adorning what sooner or later will be a corpse. We all die physically, but there is some good news! We do not have to die spiritually, and that is the good news, which Jesus came to preach, and that is why His preaching is important, and that is why His word is important, and that is why the word that I preach today is important. The message and the symbol of communion are important. That is why we gather together to worship here because this is our escape from the mob. This is our running away from the mob that presses upon us at every side, at every commercial, at every image on the television, at every billboard. This is our time to escape and pray and remember that God’s word is eternal and our souls are eternal and God’s love matters more, more than anything else.

“A Long Life Alone”

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All these other things, even our health concerns and disease, even our death, will pass away, but God’s word will not pass away, and God’s love will not pass away, and God’s embrace for you and for me forever will not pass away. God was in Christ, making peace by the blood of his cross. That matters. Our prayers here matter. To escape from the mob of the world in this sanctuary matters. Here we can recharge and be filled with God’s spirit, and go out and face another week among the things of dust and rust and decay.

Join me in a prayer of the ancient church. Let us pray.

Come Holy Spirit, come. Come like Holy fire and burn within us. Come like Holy wind and cleanse us. Come like Holy light and lead us. Come as Holy truth and teach us. Come as Holy love and enfold us. Come as Holy power and enable us. Come as abundant life and fill us, convert us, consecrate us until we are wholly thine. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Amen.