

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Epiphany 5 Year B
February 4, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today has been a very long day for Jesus.

Last Sunday, we began in the synagogue, where Jesus unfurled the Book of Isaiah and preached.¹ Then he had an exchange with a man possessed by a demon, and healed him. After that, we come to this morning's gospel as a continuation of that same day—Jesus enters the house of his newly minted disciple Peter, and finds his mother-in-law ill. Peter brings Jesus to her, and in the privacy of the house, he heals her. As soon as the sabbath was over, the disciples bring others to Jesus to be healed, nearly the whole town, and Jesus heals many. Following that, he steals away from the house to pray in the dark of the early morning, hiding himself so well that the disciples come and 'hunt' him down to bring him back, which is when he tells them that it's time to move on. He needs to share the message of the Gospel, which is what he was sent to do. And they head to the next town.

Jesus teaches, preaches, heals a man, heals a woman, heals many, prays alone, and then moves on. This is the first day of Jesus' public ministry in the Gospel of Mark. The pace feels like a gospel version of the television show '24', in which the drama and action unfold in real time—both intensely fast and very slow in the same instant².

And the crux of his ministry on this first day centers around the healings he offers in the synagogue; in the house; and to the many.

Disease, illness, disability, those were things which made one non-productive to the community, a non-useful member of society in the time of Jesus. We still privately harbor that uncomfortable notion two thousand years later, when push comes to shove. For the early church, and for the contemporary approach to medicine, especially among those who were poor, the rationale for illness lay on the person suffering, or the family of said person. There was a justice aspect to illness, where either the blame was laid on the humors of the body being out of alignment, or that illness, chronic or acute, was divine punishment. And part of that punishment was exclusion from the community, a kind of 1st century public health level of acceptable risk to the general population—those who were ill could bring others down with them.

¹ https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Epiphany/BEpi4_RCL.html

² Re: the 'gimmick' of 24 and it's efficacy: <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/06/arts/television-review-racing-in-real-time-to-track-down-an-assassin-and-a-daughter.html>

It is a safe assumption that Jesus healed those who were sick or ‘demoned’ to allow them to receive the benefits of community, to bring them ‘back’ to their God-given state, which was to have them return to the life of participation. Generally, caring about people’s wellbeing is good for business and morale (at least on paper).

But the story this morning hinges on the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law—it centers not only this Sunday’s lesson, but Jesus’ entire first day of ministry.

For those of you who heard the scripture and immediately had your hackles raised, which is to say that anyone of you who has been sick in bed and your children still wake you up to ask you to make pancakes or to plug in their iPad when there is another fully functioning adult on the premises, you can take a breath.

Jesus takes Peter’s unnamed mother-in-law by the hand and, the scripture says, doesn’t heal her, but ‘lifts her up’, *egeiren*’s her, in Greek. It’s not the word for healing, but rather the term the writer of Mark uses when Jesus brings a little girl back to life, and when Jesus is raised from the dead. Peter’s mother-in-law is not just healed, she is raised up; resurrected; *eigeiren*-ed.³

Following that, we are told that she begins to serve Jesus and the crowd he’s brought along with, and we have this notion that, still in pajamas from her illness, she slaps on an apron and some lipstick and pulls out canapes for the menfolk. But again, here the Greek Mark uses matters. She does not serve as a *doulos*—a servant or a slave—recall Dr Shaner’s image of the serving girl as the ideal servant in Ephesus.⁴ She *diakonos*-es⁵— ministers to the group. Again, this word is found two other times in the gospel of Mark—once already when Jesus was in the wilderness alone, and we are told that angels *diakonos*-ed him, waited upon him, ministered, served, deaconed to him.⁶ And one more time prior to his crucifixion when he tells the disciples who are jockeying for power that “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.” Jesus himself *diakonoses*.⁷ That’s the goal. That’s the gospel.

³ From Strong’s Greek: ἐγείρω *egeirō*, other translations mean ‘woken from sleep’, ‘roused’, but those translations seem more apt in the Gospel of Matthew given their usage. For use of *egeiro* specifically in Mark, see Mk 2:9-12; Mk 5:41; Mk 6:14; Mk 12:26; Mk 14:28 and Mk 16:6 for examples of the connection to resurrection/ new life. Also, I mashed the Greek verb into a past-tense Anglicization of it, so the proper translation would be *egeiro*-ed (instead of ‘*egeiren*-ed’), which is entirely the fault of the preacher’s 18-year lapse in her Greek studies.

⁴ Dr. Katherine Shaner opened both of her Trinity Church Boston forums with an image of the perfect serving girl in Roman Ephesus: <https://www.trinitychurchboston.org/blog/video-ephesians-forum-4-of-4-troubling-texts-ephesians-in-place-and-space>

⁵ From Strong’s Greek: διάκονος *diákonos*.

⁶ Cf. Mark 1:13, which will, ironically, be our Gospel text in two weeks, Lent 1, Year B.

⁷ Cf. Mark 10:45

There is an inclination to see health and well-being as the assumed norm in our modern world of medicine and science, the bar from which everything else is an aberration. That those who are not ‘healthy’ mentally or physically, are broken and require fixing. That discomfort hides our own various infirmities, demons and hurts, because they ‘out’ us as those who perhaps snuck into the community while being less than whole, and therefore unable to carry our own weight, our own fair share, which is clearly our meet, right and bounden duty.

Years ago, my family invited another family over to dinner. We had met them at a gathering for parents and families with children with Down syndrome—our older children were the same age, and our younger children—our chromosomally enhanced children—were only weeks apart as well.⁸ Hitting it off, we scheduled dinner together. At the end of the evening, after the chili was eaten and brownie pan sitting empty, and it was a Saturday night so I was in the process of turning into my work-night mode and readying to say goodbye, the father quietly asked me if I had prayed for our son’s diagnosis to be different. Their church, he continued, had prayed for them during their pregnancy, for the presumed diagnosis of Down syndrome to change, to heal the child, as it were. Did God not hear those prayers, he wondered? Was this a divine rebuttal to something they had done? Well intentioned as they were, those prayers had hurt them, deeming their unborn child already broken, even as it was meant to offer consolation.⁹

I do believe that God works through us in surprising ways and in surprising moments, and I recall a response coming through me, but not from me, through the post-chili and brownie ready-for-bed haze and responding to him, ‘I used to pray for my child to be different. Now I pray for me to be different.’ And only when I said that, did I begin to believe it.

Our collect today beseeches, ‘Set us free O God, from the bondage of our sins.’ On paper, it reads as debt relief for our trespasses, those things we ought or oughtn’t to have done. In God’s eyes, though, our sins are what keep us from participating in the resurrected life in Christ already given to us—the sin is in the ways that we limit the kingdom of God; the ways our fears dictate our actions; the ways our shame keeps us aloof and removed from community. The healings of Jesus weren’t about setting all to rights by restoring health—Jesus’ healing rebukes the whole notion that one can be apart from God’s love, separate from it, outside of it.

Jesus lifts up Peter’s mother-in-law and offers her life beyond the scope of shame or fear or death. And with this change, without all that limits us and our sense of self to a typically working

⁸ Down syndrome is caused by a partial or whole extra copy of the 21st chromosome—typically, humans have 46 chromosomes (23 from each parent). The 47th chromosome is what makes such humans ‘chromosomally enhanced’ (yes, it’s a joke, but also, not?)—more here: <https://mdsc.org/about-us/facts-about-down-syndrome/>

⁹ There are so many terrible places on the internet to find information on Christian thought and Down syndrome—I’m glad for you to Google it instead of me. This one stuck out, because I absolutely agree with one aspect of the response: “their intrinsic worth is not based on their abilities—just as the value of any human being is not based on abilities” and disagree with a lot of the rest, enjoy!: <https://www.gotquestions.org/Down-syndrome.html>

body and life, she becomes a minister—a deacon—she embodies this image of Christ, not jockeying for status as the disciples will, but one overflowing with love.

Jesus leaves Capernaum and moves on because ultimately he is not a miracle-maker-- the healings are not the purpose of the incarnation—they are the outcome of the inbreaking of God's kingdom. The freedom held in the healings is not personal—not of salvation presented for one person alone. Jesus tells his disciples that they move on because the message must be shared, the gospel which demands our own transformation as a corporate entity—as THE body of Christ.

CS Lewis wrote, “Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see.”

Discipleship will cost us our fragmented notion of wholeness and belovedness; we will trade that in for a glimpse of Jesus' promise of resurrection. He promises us not whole bodies and lives, but resurrected ones; ones which are in every shape and form, and yet each primed to give and receive love, to 'diakonos', to minister to one another, bringing about the communion of the whole in ways we cannot yet ask for or imagine.

Jesus has inscribed the love of God on us as a whole, each of us broken and loved members making up his body. May we each pray to be transformed in such a way where we, too, may bring that promise from town to town, person to person, community to community, sharing it widely as Jesus did for us.

Amen.