

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany February 7 2021

Mark 1:29-39

I have sat at the bedside of a man dying from cancer. I have journeyed with a young woman who wore Vibram shoes (the ones with toes) until her wounded veteran brother could walk again. She had them on for seven months. That same young man died by suicide at age 24. I have seen too many people, young and old, gripped by powers that sought to destroy them- expressed in addictions, risky behaviors, abuse towards others. I have heard the confessions of people about the worst things they have done or thought. Seen the struggle they have to be free. Free from the guilt. Free from the pain. I have seen parents who long for restoration of relationship with their children caught in addiction, children who long to be welcomed by parents who cannot accept them for who they are. I have heard the agony of those who feel alone in the world.

We are a world filled with people in need of healing- physical and mental. Needing to be freed from those things that imprison us- our addictions, our failures, our fear. In need of the life-giving energy that only trusted, loving relationships can bring.

All of these people I talk about, are our fellow members of the Body of Christ. They are our family members, our neighbors, the people who seem to have it all together. Yet, we almost never hear about these struggles. Instead, we put up a façade of perfection. This does a disservice to our faith and to those who are most certainly not perfect. Giving them a false

sense of who the Body of Christ is, and moving us away from the reality of who the Body of Christ is called to be.

I shared last week the experience of some of my students in the University of Dubuque LIFE program who read Mike Yaconelli's book *Messy Spirituality*. The members of that group were uniformly amazed, engaged, and inspired by that book. Because their vision and experience of church was one of perfection. You had to be sin free, mess free, drama free to be part of the church. Yaconelli, instead, showed them a picture of the church that was made up of the sinners, the messy, the broken, the guilty, the possessed. One that was more hospital for the sick than it was a club for those who have it together.

Yaconelli says that messy spirituality unveils the myth of flawlessness and calls Christians everywhere to come out of hiding and stop pretending to be perfect. It is the Christianity that most of us live and few of us admit. Messy spirituality, Yaconelli says, is "the delirious consequence of a life ruined by a Jesus who will love us right into his arms."

My students responded to this description of the faith with a hunger and enthusiasm that showed they had been waiting desperately to hear this truth. This was good news! The folks in the other group almost uniformly bought the book themselves to read. Just on the testimony of their classmates. I had two thoughts. First, how many more are out there yearning for this kind of recognition of the messiness of life and to be accepted and loved despite that. Second, that kind of response is every pastor's dream. It was a moment of seeing the Gospel in action and transforming lives right there.

Theologian Werner Kelber writes that Jesus in the gospel of Mark has a clear mission: “he came to announce the Kingdom of God and to initiate its arrival in opposition to the forces which threaten to destroy human life.”

Jesus came to say that the Kingdom of God was a place where people are healed, made whole, restored to the fullness of who God created them to be. It was a place where even those who were possessed by all the forces that defy God and seek to destroy human life could come to be freed from those things. So that...

So that they might be restored into community, and experience again the life-giving energy that these loving, trusted relationships bring. So that they might experience again the life-giving reality that God loves them just as they are and loves them enough not to leave them there. So that they might be healed.

Why is it so hard for us to be open about our own messy lives, our own need for healing? To be vulnerable about our own struggles with sin, with those habits and addictions we cannot break on our own even though we so desperately want to?

What would it be like, if we trusted one another enough to share our own messy lives? To live our messy faith in front of one another and the world and proclaim the good news to others that there is always room for one more.

What would it be like if we trusted Jesus to heal us? Just as he healed Simon’s mother-in-law. Just as he healed those who were brought to him that evening? What if we trusted Jesus to cast out those things that

possess us- our addictions, our fears, our sorrow? What would that mean for our lives?

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran this should be right in our wheelhouse. We understand the truth that we are both saint and sinner. That God has claimed in baptism as God's children and that we still rupture that relationship with our sinful behavior. We know that our lives are messy and that our only hope of salvation in this world or the next lies in God's boundless love, in the healing word of Jesus, in the freedom that is promised. Our only hope is in a Jesus who will love us right into his arms.

We live in a world right now that is like my students, eager to see a church that lives that love. Desperate to hear a Word spoken that proclaims that truth.

There are over 25 million active cases of Covid in the world. There are increased rates of Emergency Department visits in the US for suicide, overdose, and mental health during the pandemic. There are still hundreds of thousands of people living with cancer and other deadly diseases.

And we know in whom healing lies.

I won't pretend that healing will mean a cure for those who have cancer, but I won't rule it out. I won't pretend that any of this will happen all at once, but I have heard the story of too many people who can point to moments where their lives changed. Where the wounds in their lives that have been driving their addictions, their destructive behavior have been healed by the powerful presence of Christ's Spirit.

The power to heal lies in our God working through His Son Jesus Christ. It is why we gather tight around the door of the house, pressing in like the crowds to be healed of all that dis-eases us. To have the voices of our demons silenced. To be washed by the waters of our baptism again, feel the peace of Christ flow over us, to feel it seep into the broken places and begin to make them whole.

The temptation then, is to keep it all for ourselves. That's the implication of the disciples when they find Jesus praying in that deserted place. People are hunting for the healer for the town of Capernaum. But Jesus resists that. For his calling is to go out to the other towns and villages, into the world to proclaim the good news, to heal and cast out demons there also.

This is the pattern we live. Coming each week to the house and receiving the good news in a powerful word of healing. Then going out to proclaim the message to a hungry world desperate to hear it.

In 2021, let us do that. Let us be honest with one another about our messy lives. Let us come openly to be healed by Jesus. Then let us go, to proclaim that good news to others.

Let us pray, God of compassion, your Son Jesus Christ, the great physician, made the broken whole, healed the sick, cast out the demons that bound them. Touch our wounds, relieve our hurts, heal our disease, break the hold of our addictions, through that same Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.