

A sermon preached on February 7th, 2021 based upon Mark 1:29 – 39 entitled, “Jesus’ Agenda Is Different from the One We Would Have for Him.”

We’re making our way through the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Previously we’ve heard about Jesus’ baptism by John, his forty days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, and then the beginning of his ministry wandering about Galilee preaching the good news – announcing that the time was at hand, the kingdom of God is breaking into this world in his ministry. We heard how he called four fishermen to follow him and last week we heard that on the Sabbath Jesus went with those four new disciples to the local synagogue to share in worship, and Jesus taught with remarkable authority. In the midst of the service to everybody’s amazement Jesus cast out a demon that was oppressing a man – indeed, oppressing the synagogue as a whole.

I talked about how in Mark’s Gospel this is the primary way Jesus is presented – as the one who has power and authority over the spiritual forces of evil at work in this world. I offered a simple way of remembering what evil is up to in this world: The word “evil” spelled backwards is “live”. Evil is that force in this world that in various ways diminishes and destroys life.

We pick up the story as the synagogue morning service has ended, in the 29th verse of the 1st chapter of Mark.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.

It is interesting to notice something here. They go to Simon and Andrew’s house. We often think of the fishermen as having left absolutely everything to follow Jesus, but that wasn’t actually the case. What took place was a re-prioritizing of their lives, which included in their case leaving behind their former vocation, that of working as fishermen. They still had a place they called home -- they still had a family they care about.

Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

So out of concern for Simon’s mother-in-law Simon and Andrew tell Jesus about the sickness afflicting her (*with symptoms interestingly similar to Covid*) and out of compassion he heals her – “raising her up” in language that echoes the resurrection that will occur at the end of the story.

Simon’s mother-in-law immediately proceeds to serve the men, which might raise our shackles for the sexism this suggests. Having just recovered from her illness, why didn’t the men serve her instead? It’s an understandable reaction.

But elsewhere Jesus tells us that a) he himself has come for the purpose of serving others, and that b) those who would be great in the kingdom of God must be the servant of all others.

There is an answer suggested here to the question, why were we created? What was the purpose for which you and I were made? The answer -- to find our place of service, our place to channel God's love. At the very least our place of service will include the network of people closest at hand in our lives.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door.

When Jesus healed the demon possessed man in the synagogue, it made quite the impression. Naturally the people in the town want to bring the sick people in their lives to Jesus that he might heal them. As Jews obedient to the Sabbath laws they wait for the sun to set marking the end of the Sabbath – the day of rest – so now they can do the work of bringing the sick to Simon's front door.

And (Jesus) cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

First, just take note of the fact that he won't let the demons speak, just as he silenced the demon who cried out in the synagogue. Oddly, the demons know he is the messiah before any human beings do, and he doesn't want them announcing that fact because they can not yet fully understand what this means. We'll return to this later.

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus spent a great deal of time healing people. Mark makes it clear that the reason Jesus did this was simply as an expression of compassion. At the heart of the God revealed to us in Jesus there is compassion. God doesn't will for people to get sick and to suffer from disease. We don't have a single instance in the Bible where Jesus turned away somebody who came to him seeking healing. We should never see disease as some kind of punishment sent to us from God, though often when serious illness threatens us, that is the conclusion to which we jump.

Jesus healed people late into the night, but eventually exhausted, he sent the people home, and put himself to bed. But notice what happens next.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, (Jesus) got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

Jesus needed sleep, but he seems to have needed even more time alone to pray. He needed to get away from the crowds and connect to God and get clarity about what his life was to be about.

As we will quickly see, there are plenty of people, including his disciples themselves, who will be quick to tell Jesus what they think his life should be about -- how he should prioritize how he spends his time.

And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."

This is but the first of many examples in the Gospel in which the disciples have a hard time grasping what Jesus is about. They've been pretty impressed by what they just witnessed taking place at the front door of Simon and Andrew's house. So many people healed, their suffering relieved.

From their point of view, it's obvious what needs to happen next. *"Jesus, there's more work to be done -- more people searching for a healing. Come back in to town and get on with putting those remarkable healing powers of yours to work."*

It's interesting that Jesus has retreated back into the wilderness – back to the place where he spent forty days being tempted by Satan. There is something potentially seductive here for Jesus – an appeal to his ego that has the potential to take him off his path: All those people praising him, telling him how wonderful he is every time he heals somebody.

But with his response, Jesus makes it clear that he isn't going to let the disciples set his agenda, let them define his mission. That's God's business.

He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Notice he doesn't mention healing the sick. His focus is on proclaiming the message about God's kingdom and casting out demons – that is, setting people free from the powers of evil that oppress.

Jesus will of course heal a great many people before he is done.

But the impression you get throughout the Gospel is that Jesus doesn't want people to focus on his power to heal.

Now this is a challenge to you and me. We too would be happy to provide Jesus with advice regarding his agenda.

There is, for God's sake a horrible Pandemic going on oppressing life in so many ways, not to mention all the other folks among us who are dealing with other potentially life-threatening diagnoses.

Come on Jesus, get to work healing people. Now!

But in Mark's Gospel neither the disciples or anybody else will begin to fully understand what Jesus' mission is truly about until the whole story is told. That's why he silences the demons who declare him to be the messiah.

In a couple of chapters Jesus will begin talking about that mission to his disciples, and it won't make any sense to them. At the heart of his mission involves going to Jerusalem where he will allow the religious authorities to kill him. Embracing death on a cross is at the heart of his mission.

No wonder the disciples were disturbed and confused. I've suggested to you that the clearest way to understand the nature of evil is to see it as the force in this world that diminishes and destroys life.

Our instinctual response is that nothing diminishes and destroys life like death itself. It seems a no brainer.

But there's a truth missed in what seems so obvious. It isn't actually physical death itself that diminishes life. Rather, it is our attitude toward death.

Here's what I mean. Our instinctual response to the fact that we will all one day is to run from this fact. Intellectually we get it that there is no avoiding death, but emotionally we do all we can to pretend we can. Let's pretend we have forever to live on this earth. Let's avoid all talk of our deaths because it's – you know – morbid.

But here's the paradox: Death is what makes life on this earth precious. Death reveals that life isn't something to waste. In the face of death, we realize that life is about loving.

Painful though it is, we experience this truth when we go to a funeral of someone we have loved. Invariable we ask ourselves, *“Why was I always in such a hurry – why wasn't I more fully present to this person in the moments we shared together? Why didn't I truly appreciate this person when I had them with me on earth? Why did I let my heart get hardened, holding on to petty little grudges and resentments that blocked my love for this person?”*

Our avoidance of the fact of our deaths comes from our instinctual fear of death, which is understandable. There is a part of us (our little egos) that looks at death and recoils because death seems to mean that we enter oblivion – nothingness – and simply cease to exist.

Which is why we can't fully understand Jesus' mission or the good news he embodies until we've heard the whole story: see him confront the fear of death and all those evil powers that oppress using the threat of death as he embraces his horrific death on a cross, an act of absolute love for all people. And then to the utter surprise of the disciples, the surprise that the story doesn't end there – that three days later the tomb is discovered to be empty – Jesus is not among the dead but among the living -- and the great mystery that our bondage to the fear of death and all the ways it diminishes life has been vanquished.

Which brings us around to this strange ritual we carry out on the first Sunday of every month, this mysterious sacrament we call Holy Communion. In the bread that represents Jesus' broken body and the cup his shed blood we are invited to contemplate the mystery of his death and in

doing so embrace or death – not just at the end of our lives – but the ongoing process of the death of our anxious, controlling ego. Meeting humbly together at the cross we find a love that connects us all together – a love that in the end is the deepest reality – a love that can never die. We are invited to die *with* Jesus – the pioneer and perfecter of our faith – not to enter into oblivion but to be raised with him to a quality of life more beautiful than that which we have known in this world because this life will not be experienced through the distortions we call “sin.” We will see life as it truly is, a gift of exquisite love and beauty.