

Scripture Comments

Mark 1.29-39

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The miracle of touch

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This season of the church year is alternately known as Ordinary Time or Epiphany. On some church calendars today is the Fifth Sunday After Epiphany, on others it is the Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time. The framers of the lectionary probably had the themes of Epiphany in mind when this year's Gospel lections were chosen. The themes of manifestation or revelation have been consistent for the first four Sundays. Today's text introduces the counter theme, concealment. We first heard the idea of secrecy last week when Jesus rebuked the demon that identified Jesus as the Holy One of God. Jesus said, "Be silent." These themes of secrecy, and the disciples' inability to understand who Jesus is, will characterize much of this Gospel.

At first glance, this text appears to be four unrelated vignettes, which can make for a difficult preaching assignment. The first story is of Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law (v. 29-31) on the Sabbath in the afternoon. The second concerns healings and exorcisms at sundown (v. 32-34) on the same day. The third story describes Jesus praying alone early on the following morning (v. 35-38). The last installment is a summary about Galilee-wide preaching and exorcisms (v. 39). The flow of the collection moves in this manner: Jesus is very popular among the Galileans, Jesus responds to the popularity, and the disciples respond to Jesus. On at least four occasions Mark calls attention to the growing fame of Jesus: "At once his fame began to spread" (v. 28); "the whole city was gathered around the door" (v. 33); "Everyone is searching for you" (v. 37); "Jesus could no longer go into town openly" (v. 45).

How did Jesus respond to this fame? How was he able to continue his ministry and not be seduced by the fame? Mark provides four clues. (1) The crowd scenes are followed by Jesus in private. This pattern says something about Jesus' willingness to serve and also about his need for physical and spiritual recovery. (2) Jesus spends time alone in prayer. (3) Jesus moves on to minister to those who have not heard his message rather than return to the applause of former popularity. (4) Jesus attempts to silence those who would publicize his name and deeds. He called for silence from the demons, those he healed and the disciples.

The disciples do not understand who Jesus is or what he is doing. We see the first clue to their lack of understanding in today's reading. This misunderstanding leads to confusion, fear and eventually abandonment (14.50). In 1.35-38, Jesus is at prayer in a deserted place. Which reminds us of the setting for the temptation (1.12-13). In the first reference to the deserted place, or wilderness, Jesus is tested. The sudden popularity in today's story is a new test. Simon and the other disciples hunt for him. The Greek is more closely rendered as "chase him down." They interrupt his quiet time with what they think is good news – a big crowd is waiting. Something to watch for as we move through Mark: "searching" for Jesus usually refers to those who would distract him (3.32; 8.11) or

oppose him (11.18; 12.12; 14.1, 11, 55). The disciples are correct that crowds are seeking Jesus. What they do not distinguish is that there are seekers and there are seekers.

Go back to the first scene in the collection for today. Even though Mark is notably brief in telling the story of healing Simon's mother-in-law, all of the elements of a healing story are present: the illness is described, the healing takes place followed by a demonstration of its authenticity. In this story the last feature takes place when the woman "began to serve them." Her actions prove that she is sufficiently recovered to resume her daily routine. In today's world we may bristle at the implication that all of the men sit around while the previously sick woman rises up to serve them. Perhaps a more helpful way to hear that comment is in connection to Jesus teaching on discipleship, which comes as a response to James and John's request for power (10.35-45), and they are present in Simon's house but do not understand what the mother-in-law does.

In the second scene for today we are told that "all who were sick or possessed with demons" and "the whole city" gathers in the doorway of the house to see Jesus. No doubt this is a somewhat exaggerated claim, but it makes the point that Jesus is now a public figure. His true identity is concealed, except for the demons that he forbids to speak. Jesus is a sought after figure for his power to heal, but his teaching is neither acknowledged or understood, nor is his real identity known.

The third scene confirms that Jesus is misunderstood. The disciples hunt him and demand that he return. The demand is implicit in the statement, "Everyone is searching for you." Jesus rejects the demand and does not return to Capernaum. The miracles demonstrate the power of Jesus but do not reveal his true identity. There is nothing wrong with miracles. Jesus makes it clear, at least to us the readers, that his mission is to teach. The miracles do not conflict with his mission, but the uncomprehending responses of the people to the miracles cause conflict with his vocation. One way to think about this is that Jesus subordinates his power for healing and exorcism to the greater need for proclamation of the kingdom of God. It is also true that only within the proclamation of the kingdom can the true power of the healing be understood.

References:

Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*; 1993.
Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year B, A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*; 1993.