

HOMILY SUNDAY 5-B*
“Learning to be a Disciple”

(Job 7:1-4, 6-7; 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23; Mark 1:29-39)

As Jesus was walking along one day, he came across a man crying and asked him what was wrong. The man replied that he was blind. Jesus laid hands on him; said “Be healed”; his sight returned and the man went away praising God. Later Jesus came across a second man who was crying and likewise asked him what was wrong. The man replied that he was crippled. Jesus laid hands on him; said “Be healed”; his limbs were restored and the man went away praising God. Finally Jesus came across a third man sitting by the road crying. Jesus asked him what was wrong, and the man replied that he was a bishop. Hearing that, Jesus sat down and cried with him!

The gospel passages that we have heard last week and today present us with a snapshot of the first two day’s of the public ministry of Jesus. It is striking how that ministry takes place within the context of sickness and suffering. Today we are reminded of the extravagant suffering of the innocent Old Testament figure Job, and told of the illness of Peter’s mother-in-law.

There is much that we can learn from these passages about what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus. Watching Jesus enter into his public ministry, we learn how to respond to sickness and suffering, which today is summed up by four elements: prayer, healing, teaching and service.

The first thing we notice is that the ministry of Jesus is rooted in prayer. He took time to go apart and pray. His actions were rooted in his intimate relationship with the Father. Jesus, as busy as he was, took time to refresh himself, to waste time in prayer, to commune with the Father, listening to his Father, sharing his experience with the Father, just being in the presence of the Father. This was the source of his energy to teach, to heal and to give his very life in service.

We must do the same if we are to be his disciples and hope to do effective ministry that is focused and not just frenzied action. We must also waste time with the Father and with Jesus in deep, profound prayer. We must also listen attentively to the whispering of the Spirit of Jesus within us. It would be good for each of us to have a sacred space, a quiet place where we can also go to pray.

All too often we settle for saying prayers to God rather than listening reverently to what God wants to say to us and being open to what God wants to accomplish in us. May I suggest the ancient way of praying called *Lectio Divina*, which means *Holy Reading*. This time-tested method of prayer involves four simple steps: *lectio, meditatio, oratio and contemplatio*.

First in *lectio* we prayerfully read a passage of scripture. Second, in *meditatio*, we think about what God is saying to us at this time in our lives. Third, *oratio*, we pray with the passage for our needs and the needs of others. The last and most challenging part is *contemplatio*, which means contemplation. Here we put aside all attempts to think or feel anything, and simply rest in God’s presence, giving God our full attention and allowing God the openness to do in us whatever God wants to do. This takes great faith because we are not doing anything. We cannot get addicted to this kind of transformative prayer. We will feel that we are wasting our time but our fidelity to this kind of prayer will bear fruit in our ministry. It is the prayer of faith, the prayer of Jesus himself.

Another striking characteristic of Jesus' ministry was of course healing. According to W. Harrington, "Driving out demons and power over sickness is closely connected for the Jews. Jesus *exorcises* the spirit of the fever. Like the exorcisms, the healings are a sign of salvation. The early Christian community saw the miracles in a two fold light: 1) as a manifestation of the power of God at work in Jesus, a proclamation of the fullness of time, and 2) as signs of the redemption which Jesus has wrought, as prophetic signs.

Here, the power of Jesus over fever proclaims that the reign of God is a present reality. The verb *egeiro*, to lift up, is the same that is used of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus is the saviour who by deeds of his earthly life has prefigured the realities of the divine life now communicated to believers. Thus this story is a symbolic portrayal of the believer; one who had been prostrate beneath the power of sin but now is raised up by the Lord and called to serve him."

The New Interpreter's Bible adds Mark is careful to show readers that Jesus did not lead crowds out into deserted places to start a revolution like others. They would seek him out on their own. The first healing happens inside Simon Peter's house. The demon knew who Jesus was and what his mission would accomplish. Although Jesus came to destroy Satan's power, he would not do it by exercising miraculous powers. Jesus must suffer and die. In fact, his enemies would taunt him that he is unable to save himself from crucifixion. Mark has deliberately focused on the authority and identity of Jesus in retelling the exorcism stories. The miracles that Jesus performed were done with the specific purpose of helping people believe that he was truly the Son of God.

The private setting and presence of the witnesses suggests an important disclosure. Healing is a sign of the authority of Jesus' teaching, of his Word. Unlike the elaborate methods of the exorcists of the time, Jesus spoke with *exousia* (unique knowledge with unique power) using only his Word. In Mark's theology, Jesus is the one from whose mouth God's word is spoken, with whom God's word is, in fact, identified. In her book, *Preaching Mark*, Bonnie Thurston notes that the use of the Greek word *phimotheti*, which our translation renders as "be silent" actually means "be muzzled." It's what one would do to a dangerous dog to stop both his bark and his bite. That's what the word of God does to the unclean spirits. Jesus speaks with that kind of authority.

The disciples were also learning to take all their troubles to Jesus. Possibly the early Church saw this miracle, performed on the sabbath before sundown, as a forerunner of the eschatological resurrection of humanity wrought by Jesus through Christ's death and resurrection.

We may not see ourselves as healers, but as disciples of Jesus we share in his healing ministry. Corbin Eddy puts it well: "What we see in this gospel is not so much the answer of Jesus to suffering as his response to such suffering. Suffering was one of the evils he came to fight. He had compassion on those who suffer and made them well. The problem of suffering became an opportunity for Jesus to show what God was like. Suffering is an opportunity for us too. We may not be able to cure, but it is always within our power to care. And to care is a very healing thing. Just to be with the sufferer, is in itself a very worthwhile thing. But it's no easy thing, because it means that instead of relieving someone's pain, we have to be prepared to share it."

Third, Jesus was a most effective teacher. He did not come to settle in the town as a local healer and holy man, but to preach throughout the region. He came to do God's will, not to seek his own

advantage or popularity. He spoke of having to proclaim *the message* in other villages and towns. St. Paul in the second reading for today speaks of his need to proclaim the *gospel, the Good News*, free of charge. That message, that Good News, is that in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the power of darkness, sin and death over us is broken. We have been liberated to live a truly new way of life within the reign of God that Jesus has initiated on earth by his life, death and resurrection. That reign continues to expand especially through the ministry of his Body; the Church, the People of God.

Each of us as a disciple is called to share our faith, our experience of the Spirit of Jesus working in our lives, with others. Parents first of all accept to be the first teachers of the faith to their children when they ask to have them baptized. On-going catechesis remains a challenge that we must meet as we seek to grow as Catholic Christian communities and as an archdiocese in the Canadian Church. Noted spiritual writer and speaker Richard Rohr OFM encourages his listeners to share what they have learned as soon as they have learned it. Giving that knowledge away is the best way to keep it.

The last strong element of Christian discipleship that the readings present to us today is service. Service is the underlying expression of discipleship. Peter's mother-in-law is an example of a model disciple who serves. The gospel account tells us simply that as soon as she was healed, *she served them*: This shows the completeness of her cure and portrays her as a model of discipleship: she follows him by serving others, and shows the service expected of those who were saved by Christ. The word *soma*, used to express healing, is the same word used for salvation. More than being physically healed, Peter's mother-in-law is being saved. It is both/and. She's being called beyond her sickness to something more.

Also, the word *diekonei* for "served" is the root word of the English word "deacon." That Simon's mother-in-law served makes her, in a sense, the first deacon. She took her place among the disciples in what mattered most – service. For Mark, those who are healed move directly into service. That is what healing is for and what salvation is all about. Simon's mother-in-law was the first to understand the deepest meaning of discipleship. Finally, her fever was "fire in the bones" literally. There is a sense in which the fever didn't as much leave her as become something else, another kind of fever; a strong desire to serve the kingdom.

In the end, Mark is not only telling us a story that happened way back then but a story that continues to happen. Jesus' mission expands to neighbouring towns and cities, including our own. There, unclean spirits, including our own, are still muzzled; sickness, including our own, is transformed into opportunities for service and those who are alienated, including us, are drawn into community.

My sister-in-law, Judy, is an example of someone who has lived this gospel. She made a promise to my older brother Louis who recently died of cancer, to provide palliative care for him at home as long as she could. With tremendous love and sacrifice, she managed to do that for six months until a few days before he died. That meant much sleep deprivation, taking time off from work, constant vigilance and virtually being housebound for months. She lived the lessons of discipleship that this gospel teaches us in terms of prayer, healing, teaching and service.

Certainly, she was sustained and found strength in prayer, her own and that of others. She worshipped with the local church unless I was able to come on a Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist with her and Louis and whoever was around at the time. Her loving care and the care of many

others who helped her look after Louis was a healing force for him and gave him extra years of life. She also taught others, as she shared their painful journey by means of a journal that went to selected persons who then sent it on to countless others. Many people were touched in profound ways by her journal and by the funeral celebrations. Above all, Judy served the Lord by caring for Louis in such a devoted and loving way. In all these ways she, like the mother-in-law of Peter, was a model disciple who served.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is an affirmation of our faith in Jesus. It calls us to be open to conversion, to an experience of transformation and healing. Above all, it sends us out, forgiven, healed and transformed, to serve our brothers and sisters in need.

So as we celebrate today, let us pray that we may be model disciples whose lives of service will both teach others about the love of God as well as help them experience healing in their lives.