

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel reading contains two stories about healing. The first healing seems like something of an emergency. The second story not so much, and there were many healings in that one. I am, of course, very much tuned into such things these days, given the recent crisis with my father's health. And I'll take this opportunity to mention that he is making steady progress these days. He's out of the ICU and is now getting four hours of physical and occupational therapy every day in the rehab ward that he was moved too. Given this recent experience, I'm especially appreciative of doctors and nurses and EMTs and all of the other folks in the medical profession. That's a job that is easy to appreciate the value of, and see the results of, even if they are not always the good results of my father's case.

In the first story of our Gospel reading Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, who had come down with a fever. Now fevers could be very serious things before all of the interventions of modern medicine. And even with those interventions, coming down with a fever can still be the start of something quite serious, or even terminal. So it was no small thing that Jesus did for this unnamed woman in Peter's family. The next story occurs at the end of this same day, which began in last week's Gospel reading with Jesus casting out the unclean spirit from a man in the synagogue. Here Jesus is curing all sorts of people from this town, and casting out demons, and people are paying attention.

I think we all like tangible results this. I'm sure it's why my shed-building project back in the first summer of COVID was so satisfying. All that hard work resulted in something that I can point to. "Look what I did!" I can say to myself every time I look out our back windows. I think the disciples, and the people in Capernaum, had a similar reaction to Jesus after these healing episodes. Here is a useful fellow, someone whose actions get results. The sick are healed and demons are cast out. I don't pretend to understand how that worked, but I'm taking the text on its own terms: Jesus did these things and the people could see the immediate results.

This is a picture of Jesus that we too can relate to and appreciate, even if we're not sure about just what is going on with the demons and the spirits. This is practical stuff. He's having concrete impact on so many people's lives here. And so it is no wonder that we readily imagine that this is what the church is or should be all about: helping people who need help, serving our neighbors in concrete and practical ways.

And that's why the third part of our reading is so interesting, and so illuminating. Jesus gets up very early the next morning and goes off by himself to pray. Remember, the previous day was the Sabbath, the day when you're supposed to stop working and take time to worship and pray. Well, Jesus didn't have time to do any of that. He was busy working the whole day, which is going to get him in trouble later. But he's taking time now for a personal Sabbath, as people like EMTs and ICU nurses who have to work weekends have to do. His disciples eventually find him after apparently looking for a while. "Everyone is searching for you," they say. Now this might be just me reading into the text here, but I detect some inflection in these words that would reveal an underlying attitude: "EVERYONE is LOOKING for you!!!" Or in other words, "What on earth are you doing out here? Praying? There are all kinds of sick and possessed people back in town waiting for you to heal them. Come on, Jesus, we want an encore of yesterday's performance. You were a big hit. People love your work. They're telling all their friends. Come on back and do some more." Jesus' response is that it's time to move on to the neighboring towns. But not for the reason we might expect. It is not to do more healings and exorcisms, but to proclaim a message. "That is what I came out to do," he says.

This response of Jesus is the most important sentence in our reading this morning, because it shows us that even though Jesus spent all that time healing and casting out demons, that was not his central task, not what he came to do. He did not come to set up a clinic in Capernaum, as much as a clinic was needed. He came to proclaim that the reign of God was near, and to call on people to repent and trust that good news. And so, probably much to the dismay of the disciples and the townsfolk, that is just what he does. He goes all throughout Galilee proclaiming the message that he came to proclaim. And also casting out demons. Healing and casting out demons was not what he came out to do, but it was a *result* of what he came out to do, a result of the kingdom of God coming near. Because of who he was, he couldn't help caring for the people he came to address.

If Jesus' disciples were confused, I think it's understandable that we in the church get confused about that too. I recently read through an online discussion in one of the ELCA Facebook groups. The consensus seemed to be that it wasn't our Sunday morning worship services that made us the church, but what we did to help people out in our communities. *That's* what a *real* church does. Nobody was saying that we *shouldn't* gather for worship, but they did seem to be suggesting that that was only secondary, and also maybe a bit self-serving.

I understand the impulse here. If what we do on a Sunday morning has no connection at all to our daily lives or to the world around us – if what happens in church stays in church, to paraphrase the Las Vegas motto – then to be sure we are missing something vital about what it means to be the church. But to imagine that the church ought to be first and foremost a social service agency and that worship and faith-formation are only secondary or even self-indulgent, is to profoundly misconstrue what Jesus is all about.

What today's Gospel reading clarifies for us is that our central task as the church, following in Jesus' footsteps, is to gather regularly around the message that Jesus both proclaimed and embodied, the good news of God's coming, just-around-the-corner kingdom, and to nurture faith and trust in that promise born of repentance. Through God's means of grace, word and sacrament, confession and absolution, God reorients us and realigns our values to God's – makes of us a new creation. And then, because of who we are, because of who God has recreated us to be through these means of grace, we can't help reaching out to our neighbors in love and service.

Grace's food pantry is a perfect case in point. It is not central to who we are as the church. It is not even, as you may know, a part of our congregational budget. It has its own, separate budget. But *because* of our central task, because of the work of the Holy Spirit that happens when we attend to that task, the people of God in this place, transformed by God's love, can't help but dedicate themselves to the important work of helping to feed our neighbors in need. It's who we are! One of the highlights of my week is checking in with the food pantry staff every Thursday morning. And if we weren't doing this, or something like it, I would worry about whether we were doing a good job of our central task. But as it is, we *are* doing this, and for that I thank God.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, it is the message that Jesus came to proclaim that defines the church: God has come among us in Jesus Christ to reclaim God's good creation and to save us from the power of sin, death, and evil so that God might to rule in our hearts by love. We have been inducted into this new reign of God in Holy Baptism and made partners in God's ongoing creative and redeeming work in the world. May we, by the grace of God, treasure this defining message. May the Holy Spirit create such faith in us that is active in love. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.