

The Reluctant Healer  
 James 2:1-10, 14-17  
 Mark 7:24-30  
 September 6, 2009

One of the most distinctive aspects of Jesus and his work is healing. The lame walked, the blind had their sight restored; the deaf could hear again; lepers were made whole, and people who were in some way possessed, were freed from the demons that held them prisoner. People from every walk and station of life came to him to be healed and in every gospel in almost every chapter there is a story about healing. Often when Jesus is preaching, he is interrupted by someone in need of physical healing. In Chapter One of Mark's gospel, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when he is approached by a man with what Mark calls "an unclean spirit," and Jesus exorcises that spirit from him right in the midst of his teaching. Still in Chapter One, he heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law, and by sundown the house is surrounded by all manner of sick persons. It looked like it would be more of the same the next day, in fact the disciples tell him that everyone is searching for him, but Jesus chooses not to stay. Instead, he goes on to the neighboring towns so that he can proclaim his message because, in Jesus' words "for that is what I came out to do."

But, as luck would have it, in Chapter Two, after healing a leper who stopped him along the road, Mark says that while Jesus was preaching in someone's home to a large gathering, men came carrying a sick friend on a litter to be healed. When they couldn't get inside close to Jesus because of the crowds, they removed part of the thatched roof and lowered their friend down in front of Jesus, who I suppose, had to stop in mid-sentence to assess what was going on.

In Chapter Three, he is interrupted on the Sabbath to heal a man with a withered hand, but after that, things settle down a little bit, and he finally gets to do some teaching and preaching, which is, after all, what he knew he'd been called to do. He calls disciples, and he tells parables, and he stills a storm. But this respite from healing is of short duration: in Chapter Five, he goes to the land of the Geresenes to preach, but he's sidetracked by a possessed man whom he obligingly frees of his internal demons, but then the Geresenes, scared by what they've witnessed, beg him to leave their neighborhood and so he never has the chance to deliver the sermon he'd prepared for them.

Well, you get the idea. Jesus sees himself as a preacher and a teacher, but he keeps on being interrupted in this calling by sick people who don't necessarily want to hear his message; they just want to be made well. I think it's safe to say that at this point, Jesus is a reluctant healer who may see healing as a nuisance and a distraction from his primary calling in life to preach the message he announced at the start of his ministry: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mk 1:15).

Now in today's gospel reading, here it is again. This time he's slipped away to Tyre, to an undisclosed location, and he doesn't want anyone to know he's there. But Mark says, "He could not escape notice," and before he can kick off his sandals, put up his feet, and relax, here comes a woman, a Syrophonician and a Gentile, begging him to heal her daughter. And Jesus just snaps. Yes, he snaps. I know we don't like to think of gentle Jesus, meek and mild, speaking disrespectfully or dismissively to anyone, but here it is in black and white, and if it were not true, why in the world would Mark have included it? This is the kind of unflattering story that you just wouldn't make up about your hero, about God's messiah! Where is a good editor when you need one??

To her plea for healing, Jesus replies, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." It's a brush off. He's saying, "Sorry, lady, unless you are a part of the chosen group, my kind of people, the doctor is not in today." Jesus

isn't talking "puppy dog" or "lap dog" or "cute little pet" here; he's talking homeless, scavenging, untamed, maybe dangerous and definitely annoying, predator dog, who roams the streets and rummages through the garbage heaps for food, fighting with other dogs to survive. Not a pretty metaphor for this woman kneeling in front of him.

Now, we might say we wouldn't act as Jesus did, but honestly now, isn't that what we all have said or done, or at least have wanted to say or do, when confronted with outsiders who want something, when we think there aren't enough resources to go around, or we're afraid that something we think of as ours might be taken away? You have to draw the line somewhere, don't you? You have to have some kind of boundary of who's in and who's out, who's worthy and who's not, or you just get taken advantage of, eaten alive. For Jesus, this woman is not a Jew, she's not even from that area, but from up in Syria somewhere, she has no standing, no legitimacy, no value. He owes her nothing.

But this worthless, alien woman doesn't budge. If he calls her a dog, fine, she'll be a dog, if it gets her what she wants. And so she says, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Now, that rings a bell somewhere in Jesus' mind. He had just recently been preaching to a huge crowd of people, maybe as many as 5,000, and the day had gotten away from them; they were all hungry, and the disciples wanted to send the crowd home because there wasn't enough for all of them to eat. But Jesus took the little bit that there was, certainly not enough food to go around or to share – only five loaves of bread and two fish – and dedicated them to God, then broke them, and gave them to his disciples to distribute. And you know the story – everyone was fed – and there were all kinds of crumbs left under the table – "twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of fish." (Mk 6:43).

Jesus remembers – he knows that there is enough – enough bread to feed the people, enough energy in him to heal the sick. "It's not fair," he'd said to the woman; and maybe he's right; it's not fair. But then when has the grace, mercy and love of God ever been about fairness? Jesus knows that within the mercy, love and grace of God, there is always enough to go around for everyone to be fed or to be healed, and no person, regardless of their gender, or their place of birth, or their status in society, need go without. His old boundaries of who's in and who's out, what's fair and what's not fair don't work when the Kingdom of God draws near. He'd been preaching it; but now he lives it, learns it, experiences it in a personal way.

And that is the same message from the Letter of James for today as well. "Faith without works is dead"; "be doers of the word and not hearers only." It does no good to smile at a poor person, and say "Take care!" We are the ones who have to take care of the poor. Over and over James says it: if we respond to God's call, we have to push old boundaries aside, embrace outsiders, give up the notion that there's not enough to go around, some people are better than others or more worthy; or that some people just don't measure up or qualify for what is available to share. We may resist; we may even lose our tempers – there's been a lot of that in the news these days – but the call of God keeps after us, urging us to step over the lines we've drawn to protect ourselves and to embrace the reality that God has enough for everybody to have something.

James says God doesn't make distinctions between rich and poor. Whenever we hesitate or turn away or treat people differently because of something about them that makes us uncomfortable or afraid; whenever we limit who we will allow them to be or who we will be to them, we are making distinctions. Whenever we complain, "It's not fair," that is sin, and it's not just sin in James. Same thing in Acts, when Peter says "God shows no partiality;" same thing in 1John that says "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" Same thing in the gospels, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself." Same thing in the Old Testament, in Proverbs, "The rich and the

poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.” (Prov. 22:2) Or Deuteronomy, “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” (Deut. 15:11).

Maybe it’s encouraging in the midst of the rancor around us today to remember that Jesus was a reluctant healer. At first, he didn’t really want to do it. He had another agenda, another view, other priorities. And then he had a personal experience that opened his eyes and changed his mind. He was able to say to the Syrophonecian woman, “You’re right.” “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

Doing the right thing is often not easy. And right now our country is trying to decide what is right, and we are a bunch of reluctant healers. But with 46 million of our neighbors without health insurance, 10 million of them children, with many families only one medical emergency away from bankruptcy; and 60% of all bankruptcies connected to health care expenses, often of people who have some kind of insurance, what do we believe and what are we going to do? Are we just going to throw up our hands and say, “Go away –it’s only fair that healthcare is reserved for those who sit at the table and can pay for it,” or are we going to realize that even the crumbs underneath the table can be lifesaving and to be shared; are we going to understand that in God’s economy fairness isn’t the guiding principle, mercy is; are we going to believe that in the kingdom of God there is always enough for everybody to have some?

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