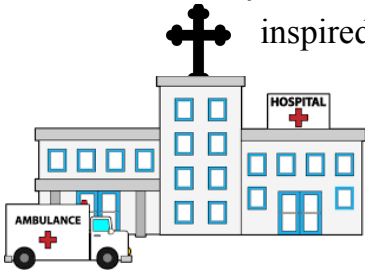


Field Hospital of the Soul

a sermon based on Mark 1:21-28
& 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
First Presbyterian Church, Hibbing MN
January 28, 2018

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*

Many Christians from the first several centuries wrote about a vision of the church
inspired by this reading from Mark's gospel and other similar passages.



The church is not a museum of saints
but a hospital for sinners.

Of course, this also reflects a different understanding of sin than we are used to.

Sin wasn't seen as a legalistic problem,
such that if you do something wrong you are "guilty" of sin
and need to be punished or at least be made to pay reparations.

Rather,
sin was perceived as the symptoms of a spiritual "ailment" that needing healing.
And the place that offers the treatment is the Church.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus demonstrates this understanding of what the Church is for.
We're still only in chapter one of Mark's gospel - and Jesus enters a synagogue, teaches,
and heals.

He heals the man with the unclean spirit.

This wasn't one of the more physical healings, curing the blind, the lame, the lepers...
this man's affliction was different - a mental and spiritual one.

It was not *knowledge* that he lacked.

The unclean spirit PERCEIVED and KNEW Jesus to be the Son of God
and publicly proclaimed as much.
Yet he could not STAND his presence.

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He found the presence of the divine so intolerable he could only conclude that
this closeness was meant to destroy him.

There is something off here.

Humanity HAS the capacity to experience God.

This is one of the points that most spiritual traditions agree on.

Buddhist and Taoist texts claim this to be,
even the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster agrees.

People were created to be able to experience God.

That this individual could not stand it was proof that something was wrong.

Something was interfering with this capacity,
something that marked him as having “an unclean spirit.”

Many modern people have trouble with the idea of “demons”
and it is fine to psychologize the issue if you choose.

But really, even psychologically speaking,
it is not a bad idea to externalize
to not identify with it,
to recognize that you are not your thoughts
nor are you are your emotions.

No how you respond to your thoughts and emotions is a different matter,
that’s on you.

But nevertheless, when you come face to face with the Holy,
and you RECOGNIZE it
the proper response is not
shouting and wailing in despair how you are going to be destroyed.

But when this happened, Jesus was not angry with the MAN,
but rebuked the SPIRIT that was causing the trouble, ordering it to come out of him.

And it did.

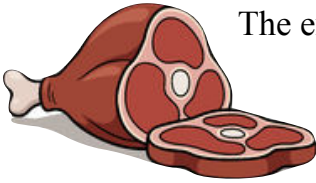
It is little wonder that the people who saw this were amazed,
and started bringing their sick and demon-possessed to him.

They all wanted this healing too.



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In the epistle reading this morning,
Paul writes to the church of Corinth
regarding how they can be the best hospital for the soul that they can,
The external logistical question was whether or not it was okay
for a Christian to eat meat.



All meat at that time was sacrificed to idols,
to various gods the pagans served.

Some Christians reasoned that because the “gods” the meat was sacrificed to were not real,
that there was no reason they should become vegetarian.

They could eat the meat without thinking about it as being dedicated to a lesser god,
but simply as tasty.

Other Christians were scandalized. Their minds couldn't quite make that leap,
and they thought best to give up EVERYTHING associated with their former pagan lives.
Eating meat was a profoundly religious experience and could no longer be done in good faith.

Paul doesn't give a ruling here, because both sides are right.

Some were strengthened by defiantly eating the meat.

Some were strengthened by their abstinence from it.

Paul gets to the real issue underlying the problem - passing judgement against others.
Those who abstained from meat were not to think themselves better than those who did not.
Those who ate the meat were not to think themselves superior for their knowledge.
Those who think themselves superior are to avoid being condescending.

This actually reminds me of another story passed down to us
from the wisdom of fourth century monks.

There was a certain monk from Rome who became well known for being a man of prayer and
for having the spirit of prophesy.

Another monk, this one from Egypt, travelled to meet the holy man.
And meet him he did.

He found the Roman monk wearing soft clothing, and saw that he had a bed
with a *BLANKET* and a *PILLOW!*

They had a nice meal and even had *wine*.

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The Egyptian monk was less than impressed.
The holy man saw this and wanted to heal the Egyptian's mind.
So he asked about his visitor's former life.
He had never lived in a city,
but was a herdsman who slept on the ground in the fields.
He ate dry bread and salt fish and drank water.
Well, now it makes sense that he found his host's life so luxurious.
The monk from Rome had an important post in the imperial palace,
lived in a nice house and had great wealth,
beds decked with costly coverings, and equally expensive clothes.
The Egyptian monk then understood his error,
knowing how much the holy man had sacrificed when he became a monk.
How could he then scorn the Roman's weakness.
Especially when it was clear that this weak man was very much connected to God.

The difference is not just in each man's previous way of life,
but in their present capacity for a disciplined life.
You are to do what you can, not be discouraged by what you can't,
and to not compare that to what others can or can't do.

Perhaps a clearer example, also from the desert Fathers is a story in which
the question arises whether evil thoughts defile a person.
A hermit explained "everyone is required to act according to his capacity."
"Suppose there was a valuable jug and two monks came in, one of whom had a
great capacity for a disciplined life, and the other a small capacity.
Suppose the mind of the more disciplined man is moved at the sight of the jug and
he says inwardly "I'd like to have that jug,"
but the idea leaves him and he puts away any thought of it,
then he would not be defiled.

But if the less disciplined man covets the jug and is strongly moved by an impulse
to take it, and yet after a struggle he does not take it, he would not be defiled either."

It is actually the second man who would grow more from the incident,
and he should not be judged for having the thought or for having to struggle with it.



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In all of these examples, making judgements based on how someone lives,
what they chose to eat or what they abstain from,
or how disciplined they are or are not
is simply not helpful.

In fact it is harmful to the one doing the judging, because like the Egyptian monk,
they miss out on the possibility to learn from somebody
who might actually be worth listening to.

And also because a mind practiced in finding fault
tends to be less practiced at finding what is good.

In any case, judgement is not going to fix the problem.

I think this is something we should be paying attention to.

If the church is a hospital,
we'd do well to act as though failures, shortcomings, weaknesses,
whether they be those of others or our own,
don't need to be condemned and punished so much as *healed*.

In seeking our own healing,
we can seek to not listen to thoughts that enter our heads,
be they judgmental or otherwise spiritually destructive,
just as the monks were able to put aside the thoughts of taking that really shiny jug.

Just as the Egyptian monk was able to overcome his scorn for the Roman
Just as Paul instructs the Corinthians to adjust how they think about their food choices.

“Knowledge puffs up, but Love BUILDS up.”

Paul tells the the Corinthians
Knowledge has its place, and it is even an important place,
but that place is NOT IN BOLSTERING OUR EGOS.

It is the love of Christ that heals.

And it is Christ's healing love that enables us to better experience God,
...without feeling like we are being destroyed.

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Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.