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“Healing One Another”

Mark 1:29-39

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As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. He came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons, and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him.

When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."

He answered, "Let's go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do."

And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Mark 1:29-39

The world is always falling apart somewhere. The sun stops shining. The sky goes dark. Sometimes it darkens with the silence that follows a painful conversation, a difficult text, or the moment someone should have spoken up. Sometimes it is a visit with a doctor, a trip to a hospital, or a call from an assisted living facility. Sometimes it is a slammed door, a shattered hope, or a word that breaks our heart.

We want people to think we are fine. We want to look like we can handle anything that comes our way. If our lives are not exactly what we hope for, all we need is Pilates, blue apron, or a meditation ap.

If we are worn down, we just need quality time with our loved ones. If we are overweight, we just need a personal trainer that will help us burn the fat. If we are tired, we just need a good night's sleep, a weekend trip, a monthlong trip.

We want to believe we are just a step from feeling great again, but things keep happening that let us know we are not in control of much. Someone we love gets sick, and we are thrown by how little we can do. A friend dies unexpectedly, and we are broken because we cannot do anything. An aging parent is always in the back of our mind, and we cannot get past the sadness.

What we thought was a run of bad days seems to have no end. The pain that will not go away pushes us down. Life seems senseless. Mindless tragedies fill the news—school shootings, car crashes, natural disasters, and climate change disasters.

Problems—large and small—steal our hope—rain on the day of the picnic, a bad cold when we are having a party, a wrong number in the middle of the night, a train that is late, a challenging child, a broken marriage, a parent's death, a neighbor's envy, or a friend's rejection. Some days we feel broken. We are sick and need to be healed.

The percentage of adults in the United States who report having been diagnosed with depression has reached 29%. The percentage who are currently being treated for depression is 18%. Both rates are the highest recorded by

the Gallup Poll since it began measuring depression. Only 59% say they have a best friend. 12% say they have no close friends. 58% say they feel like no one knows them well. 52% report feeling lonely. 47% say their relationships are not meaningful.

Loneliness and mental health concerns often go together. We are not that good all by ourselves. Left alone most of us tend to make ourselves sadder. We are not sure how to respond when we feel despair. Sometimes we push the people we need away. We stay away long enough that others stop trying to include us. After we ignore the emails and texts for a while, they stay away because trying again feels awkward. In this time of isolation, political polarization, and social media addiction, our need for human connection is more crucial than ever, and easy to avoid. We need healing.

When we get our first job, we know we are underemployed, but it is just a first job. When we get our second job, we know it is not everything we want, but we will get there. Many spend their whole lives feeling like they should have a better job. Circumstances make them wonder, if this job is who I am, how sad is that?

Maybe you love living alone. You are industrious and creative. You do interesting things. You thought you were good at living by yourself, but then there is a moment when you feel so alone it almost kills you.

Maybe your dream was to have a partner. You love having one special person. You thought you were a kind and generous partner. You thought you were good at it, but then there is a moment when your partner lets you know you are not as good at it as you thought.

Maybe you wanted to be a parent. You love being a parent. You thought you were the kind of parent every child would want, but then there is a moment when your child lets you know you are not as good at it as you thought. We need to be healed from disappointment, depression, loneliness, abuse, anger, boredom, and bitterness.

In Jesus' day there were lots of people who needed to be healed. There were doctors practicing medicine as best they could, even if we would cringe at their approach. They were trying to make medicine where there was not much, so they made ostrich egg poultices to heal broken bones. A sick person might be better off without an attending physician, but they were doing the best they could.

Scholars suggest that healing miracles in the Gospels are not physical cures in the way we think about them—take a Tylenol and your headache goes away—but included changes that were not just physical, but also led to a change in relationships. Diseases kept people from participating in the life of the village. Sickness meant ritual impurity which meant isolation and loneliness.

Jesus healed their disease and their dis-ease, restoring them to wholeness, and restoring them to their community. The healing stories in the Gospels are not the same as curing, because something more is happening. The word for healing, *sozo*, is also the word of saving.

Modern medicine speaks of curing polio, advances in the search for cancer's cure, curing an infection with antibiotics. Scholars in medicine as well as the New Testament make a distinction between curing and healing, between illness and disease. Illnesses can be cured—not

always, of course, but that is the work of curing.

Disease is what the person suffering from illness experiences. Take AIDS for example. Researchers worked furiously to find a cure, but the disease associated with the illness often resulted in being ostracized and treated as less than a person. Discovering medical treatments for AIDS patients is related to curing. Reading poetry and giving backrubs to the victims is a way of promoting healing.

29 verses into Mark's story of Jesus, Jesus leaves the synagogue to go to Simon's house. Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever, burning up. Jesus takes her by the hand, and helps her sit up. The fever leaves her, and she prepares a meal for them.

The meal is a curious detail. Maybe Mark wants us to see this as her way of thanking Jesus. Or maybe Mark is telling us that her healing is complete. She feels like her old self. She goes back to her usual routine of serving people.

Later that same day, after sunset, when the Sabbath is over, the whole city lines up to watch Jesus' care for those who are sick. He heals their sick bodies and their tormented spirits. For Jesus and the Gospel writers who tell these healing stories, illness and the accompanying dis-ease are the work of "the evil one." This is the same evil that is at work today in rampant poverty, unequal access to medical care, and pandemic hunger. Working to address these inequalities is still the work of healing.

Way before dawn, Jesus gets up and goes to a secluded place to pray. Think about the doctors you have known who took the time to learn your name and see you as a person, doctors who ask questions about your life, doctors who have the gift of healing as well as curing, and

doctors you can imagine praying.

The disciples go to find Jesus: “Everyone’s looking for you.”

Jesus says, “Let’s go to some other towns so I can share the good news of God’s healing. That’s why I came.”

They travel from town to town, preaching in the synagogues, and healing those afflicted by evil. Healing was a big part of Jesus’ life. In the Gospels, we read about a woman who cannot stop bleeding, folks whose legs no longer work, people suffering epileptic seizures, eyeballs that cannot see, crusty and matted over.

Jesus cares for the hurting. If he is our example, we have to offer healing to one another. When Jesus invites us to follow, he invites us to love like God loves. God heals those who are hurting, so that we can heal one another. To be like Christ, we have to be attuned to signs of loneliness and exclusion. We have to find ways to heal one another. God heals through God’s people.

We need one another because we are broken, and those who care for us are the way God cares for us. We offer one another healing kindness, healing forgiveness, and healing love. We offer healing, even if there is no cure for the illness.

God brings us to wholeness in a variety of ways. A child laughs us into a sense of wonder. A troubled adolescent who finds a better way makes us proud. An elderly woman who refuses to be old makes us smile.

A few years ago, Kyle Berlin, a student at Princeton, observed: “Every student I knew was in some way or another anxious or depressed, and I’m not sure why. It still baffles me.”

He mentioned it to Matthew Weiner, the school's associate dean of religious life, known to students as Dean Matt. They talked a lot about how to cultivate compassion in a high-powered setting where the emphasis is on excellence, efficiency, survival. Institutions do not, as a matter of course, perpetuate kindness.

One morning, Weiner told Berlin about something he had noticed at lunch the day before. The woman responsible for swiping the diners' meal cards had been smiling and chattering with students as they filed by. She converted a glum procession into a smiling parade. Dean Matt said, "I thought, 'She's doing my job'."

Berlin said, "That's Catalina! I've known her since freshman year. She's a hidden chaplain."

"Hidden chaplains" became the term they used for staff members (not professors) who, in their regular encounters, brightened students' days. Their unwitting ministry combined elements of angelic supervision, parental nurturing, and quietly glorious acts of healing. They printed up postcards—"Who is your hidden chaplain?"—and distributed them around campus. Nominations poured in, and a new tradition was born. Each year in May, the hidden chaplains are invited to a banquet. In 2023, there were over 100 in attendance.

Catalina explained, "When I met Kyle, he asked, 'How do you have so much energy?' And I said, 'If I don't talk to you guys, I'll feel your sadness.' My job is very simple. It's boring if you don't talk. I'm just a mama with five kids. And I feel like these kids are part of my kids. Their mama's not here. 'You see this crazy woman? I hope my crooked smile is making you happy!'"

Thomas, another hidden chaplain who works for the

dining service, said: “The students put a lot of confidence in me. I don’t have kids of my own. It makes me feel important.”

Nelly, a sophomore, said the hidden chaplain program has taught her to pay attention to the staff, “I can’t walk by the people who work here without saying hi. This inspires us to see them, to be on the lookout, and meanwhile, they’re on the lookout for people who see them.”

At the banquet, one by one, students and staff stood to pay tribute to one another.

Mia said, “You guys are good people. You have love in your heart.”

At a table in back sat the man who would be cleaning up after the celebration—Keith, a custodian. He did not know the name of the student who nominated him: “But I think I know who it is. I talk with him. He’s Muslim. He comes for Friday prayers. I’m a spiritual person, a Christian.”

It is so dangerous out there, and these kids are so overanxious, we have to watch out for each other. We have to take care of each other. (May 29, 2023, New Yorker, “Princeton’s Hidden Chaplains: Celebrating the unwitting ministry of the workaday heroes who brighten the days of overanxious Ivy Leaguers,” Nick Paumgarten)

God helps us notice those who are overanxious. God helps us see those whose wounds are almost invisible. We pray for wisdom to love those overwhelmed by grief. We help the neglected whose resentment makes them bitter. We care for those whose depression makes it hard for them to even show up. We look for those who are hurting, because we are hurt, too. Together we open our hearts, and let God heal us.

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