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St. Augustine's Chapel  
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B  
February 5, 2012

Someone asked me this week, "So in the Episcopal church, do we have "assigned" readings? Cause I don't like the ones we pick. They are so NOT what I think God is like. I mean really, possession of demons, and unclean spirits....it doesn't seem very Episcopal.

It's a good question. And a fair one.

Texts like this morning are startling. We hear talk of people possessed by demons and unclean spirits, and mass exorcisms, and most of us either tune out, or turn off. We listen to the stories of healing and it makes us more suspicious than relieved. We ask "if this is the story we are supposed to believe about Jesus, why are so many of us still laid up with sicknesses, or nursing wounds that won't go away, or living with chronic pain. We wonder..."Does God's reach not extend to us? Is Jesus's era over and gone? Or is it us, are we just outside the blessing, unworthy or unfit for this kind of healing?

Good questions, and fair ones...and exactly why we are "assigned" these readings by the revised common lectionary...because when we ask those questions and demand an answer, we realize that despite the deep chasm between 1st century Christianity and this morning, **the same need for healing is met by the same God of restoration in the same form of community.**

We read text like Isaiah and we come to understand that in our Babylonian-like wavering, our political skepticism, even our disbelief from our places of exile, **we have a similarly compelling case** for trust in God's healing over and against any other source of help. We see that just as God has delivered people from the horrors of hunger and heartache in the history of the bible, so God longs to deliver us.

We read the psalm and it tells us about an ongoing creator God who lifts up the downtrodden, casts the wicked to the ground, and calls us

to praise the creator not for the sake of God, but so that we might go out into the world and sing songs of love louder than the demons and spirits.

We read the Gospel and we come to see that healing is not some demon wrangling spiritual warfare between some little red guy and some whirling swirling bearded card dealer in the clouds. We read that healing is not even about individuals and God or these tired, sick bodies we inhabit, at least not exclusively. We read that healing is more the byproduct of the miracle of life restored by God' love and liberation, a miracle that is available to everyone, a blessing that God offers to anyone, a reach long enough to encompass us, even when physical healing doesn't come.

We read these texts and we see that healing is about God working tirelessly to bring each of us to our fullness, the most whole we could possibly be, the most loving and selfless, and serving and significant, so that the whole of the human project will succeed, so that the kingdom will come, so that, individuals in community are strong enough and loud enough and loved enough to drown out the forces of darkness that hover around us.

**We read them so that we might see that the whole of the biblical narrative is the story of God's desperation to restore the world to order through "love in community."**

And if that is the case...this gospel is so much more than a story of one woman being cured of some fever so that she can serve her household, again. Or even about a whole city of people being raised up with new strength and power. It is about all of creation rising up and each of us coming together to put the kingdom of God back together.

That's the urgency of Jesus in Mark's gospel. There are people hurting, there is no time to waste. Love needs to be let loose in the world. That's the universal and timeless truth of this text and when we read it together, on this particular Sunday, in this particular political season, we find a new word for a new cultural climate, a new

truth for our modern problem, a new definition for the heart of God. And, a new identity as one who is being healed.

All of us are Simon's mother-in-law really. All of us are part of the crowd waiting at the door at the end of the day. All of us carry some illness or another that isolates us and inhibits us. Our diseases, too, bear a heavy social cost, something that keeps us from earning a living, or making a life, something that holds us back from loving ourselves and each other, something that strips away our ability to live deeply into our community, even contributing to our own household. The worst part about suffering, it that it cuts off from each other. And when we are isolated, that's the empty place where the "demons" of fear, and ego, and addiction, and loneliness settle in and take up residence. And this is where we are broken down with feelings that we aren't good enough, or worthy enough, or lovely enough, for anything more than captivity in a weakened body.

So we gather in Simon's courtyard, to wait in line to be "raised up," restored to community, returned to the ministry for which we were created because we long for the day when we are no longer defined by our maladies, when whatever disease or stigma or mental condition, no longer has dominion over us. When the cancer doesn't define us. When the abuse no longer shackles us. When the envy or greed or anger no longer consumes us. When we can be the full person that God created us to be, living unrestrained for the purposes of love. We long to be participate in the reign of God.

That is what healing in Mark's gospel means, restoration of self to the proper order of things so that real life can be lived again—free from the things that eat away at us, the things that keep us awake at night, the things that threaten to consume us with fear and sadness. Those are the demons Jesus casts out; those are the fears that Jesus silences.

But it is even bigger than that, or at least bigger than us...healing in Mark's gospel means restoration of self for the sake of the community, moving out of the stigma of sickness for the sake of service, out of paralysis into action in the world. And when we are defined by our service and not by our sicknesses, by our possibility

and not our problems, for what we have to bring and not how we are broken, the whole community is healed. Everybody is better when everybody is better.

That is why we all must line up. That is why we all have to gather at the door. Because the whole of society cannot function as God desires unless ALL are restored. The reign of God depends on it. Your healing and my healing, and all of our particular gifts stacked on top of each other. When each of us stand in line to claim the healing power of God's transformative love, and begin to serve the betterment of the whole social order, the kingdom is coming. That is god's design.

And if this is what healing does, and that is what Jesus was doing....I say bring on the difficult text. Let's embrace the faith we proclaim as not only the property of the ancients, but ours to harness as well. If we are inside God's reach, lets grab it. If the blessing extends to all, lets grab it.

Let's line up, gather at the door. It's the best chance we have, better than anything we could devise, a wholeness inside us and around us that is so perfect that the forces of hatred and isolation and deprivation cannot win, even though our bodies may lose. Because being "raised up" is when we see ourselves as beloved children of God, restored, redeemed, renewed, and once healed, we cannot but try to snuff out the poverty of spirit, oppression of bodies, enslavement of souls—true diseases—in order to create a community of love and healing and hope to feed the world.