

“The Heart of the Healer” Mark 1:29-39 (NRSV)

As most of you know I've spent much of the last five weeks at home, after five days in the Vancouver General Hospital, recuperating from surgery for a revision of a left hip replacement, which I received almost 21 years ago, after suffering a cross-country skiing accident. Although, over the years, the doctor told me the original hip replacement had served me “spectacularly” well, we both knew the day was coming when I'd require a replacement; what I didn't know was how painful the surgery would be. But, thankfully, that's all behind me now. And, let me say again, how much I've appreciated all the prayers and words and tokens of encouragement I've received from many of you during these past weeks of healing.

It seems quite appropriate, therefore, that we've now come in our studies in Mark's Gospel to the first recorded incidents of **Jesus' healing ministry**. Spending time as we do, Sunday by Sunday, with these stories of Jesus we have the opportunity to refresh ourselves with ample demonstration of our Lord's compassionate heart and effective, healing care. Let's take a few moments this morning to rediscover “the heart of the healer.”

1. Jesus' heart: the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mk. 1:29-31).

The four new fishers of people must've nearly danced from the synagogue after the healing of the demoniac that Sabbath morning (1:21-28). Great things had happened at church!

Now, not unlike the way we go home (or out) for lunch after a service at church on Sunday, they were on their way with their Master to Peter and Andrew's house for **the usual Sabbath midday meal** (Barclay, 1956, p. 28). What things they'd have to talk over! Their minds were relishing the conversation and their tummies were growling for the food. (I suppose you might anticipate some talk about the service and the sermon, perhaps even enjoying some “roast minister” with your meal; ministers might look forward to partake in some “roast congregation”!) But in this case, there wasn't much of a table conversation or even a meal to be had. They found Peter's mother-in-law in bed with a fever (1:30). **Instead of a hot, delicious Sabbath feast, they found a sick cook.** This is no way to return from church, especially if you are the preacher! I find that after a preaching at a service – and having had only a small breakfast -- I need to eat.

Peter probably had no idea his mother-in-law was ill when he invited the Master and his friends over. But there **she was, sick “with a fever.”** Perhaps she wasn’t gravely ill, but she certainly was incapacitated. She was too sick to do much of anything. It’s a situation with which we can identify.

What happened next? Verse 31 tells us that **Jesus “came and took her by the hand and lifted [or helped] her up.** Then “the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” Wow! If only all headaches and tummy aches could be cured that quickly! How did Jesus do it? Luke’s Gospel suggests, in a parallel passage, that **Jesus “rebuked the fever”** (Lk. 4:39); Matthew’s account suggests **he only had to “touch” her and she was made well** (8:15). I don’t know much about the mechanics of this particular healing, but I do know that **Jesus had an unusual ability to make people well.**

The point is **Jesus could have healed her any way he pleased.** The Gospels reveal that at times Jesus performed miracles with a simple word, or with something as complicated as a mixture of spittle and mud, or with instructions to wash in a pool. He could do them anyway he wished. No doubt, the reasons for the different ways in which Jesus healed people rested as much in the mental, emotional and moral conditions of what his patients were experiencing, and what he wanted to communicate to them in that condition, as much as in their physical ailment. **Divine healing will always occur beyond, as well as alongside, anything doctors and nurses can do.** Here, our Lord’s reaching down and taking a dear woman by the hand was simply a natural, instinctive action, springing from Jesus’ compassionate, sympathetic love. Later, Jesus did virtually the same thing with a so-called untouchable leper (1:41), something unheard of in his time.

Jesus’ extended hand was an expression of the genuine love he felt. It was “a condensation ... of the very principle of [his] Incarnation” (Alexander Maclaren, Exposition of Holy Scripture, Vol. 8, 1957, Mark). Jesus’ touch tells us volumes about what he is like and how much he loves. To touch us in love, with healing power, is his instinctive way; it is the way of his healing heart. This is what he wants to do with each and every hurting soul – with those who know him and those who do not know him -- with anyone who need a touch of his overwhelming, healing grace. What a balm this ought to be to all our bodies, to all our hearts, and to all our souls!

We see **the woman’s heart response**, too, in that **she immediately got up and “began to serve them.”** This is the tell-tale sign of everyone who has

truly received the healing touch of Jesus Christ. Our response to him should be like that of the talkative woman who received Christ under Charles Spurgeon's ministry, and said, "Oh, Mr. Spurgeon, Christ has changed my life, and he shall never hear the end of it!" I like her enthusiasm but, perhaps, she could've toned down the blabbering a bit!

And after her healing, **the lunch she served must have been some meal!** It was great because she did her best with what she had. But it was also great because of the way it would have been served. Most of all it was great because of the excitement she felt, "Come here, daughter, and you, too, my beloved son-in-law! Feel my forehead. You, too, Andrew, James and John! I was on fire, and burning up, and now I feel well. Indeed, I've never felt better! The Lord be praised!" The joyful conversation and laughter around the table would've been heard all around the Sabbath-quieted streets of Capernaum, and it probably continued, echoing out of the house all afternoon, until the shadows began to lengthen.

2. **Jesus' heart: the healings at night** (Mk. 1:32-34).

As evening approached, **an unmistakable air of anticipation** settled over Capernaum, for with the conclusion of the Sabbath at dusk, all the sick and deranged in the neighbourhood could be carried to Jesus, in the hope that he might be able to do something for them, too. Word had gotten around at what had happened at Peter's mother-in-law's house. A delectable tenderness blanketed the town and the countryside as the whole community waited for nightfall. The law said that the Sabbath ended when three stars appeared in the night sky. So, when the sun had set and the stars were clearly blinking above, the people came. Case after case arrived at the door. **There appeared a surging mass of handicapped and diseased**, accompanied by their family and friends. Mark says, "And the whole city was gathered around the door" (1:33).

I don't know if you've ever seen anything like that. I know some **doctors offices are crowded** and, sometimes, there can be an awfully long waiting time. Perhaps you yourself have spent some time, waiting for assistance, along with others, in the **emergency department of the local hospital**. Perhaps the closest thing to this scene is are **the thousands of people in Haiti** who waited for medical help after the earthquake last January, and who now have to wait again, suffering from the dreadful effects of cholera.

In any case, **Jesus' heart went out to them naturally, and with inexplicable healing power.** Mark tells us "... he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons ..." (1:34). What a wonderful evening! The demons fled pell-mell from his presence; the bed-ridden tossed their mattresses in the air; and the handicapped threw their crutches away. The comatose were lucid and talking. And the onlookers were in a state of dumbfounded joy. The sounds of laughter and happy talk must have carried far out over the waters of the Sea of Galilee.

Marvellous as it was, **we should not be naïve** about what was going on. Most of the people who came **simply wanted something from Jesus.** There's a reasonable sense in which we cannot blame them. Anyone who has an ongoing disability or chronic illness can certainly empathize with these folks' conditions. At the same time, these townsfolk tragically foreshadow the thousands of people who only want Christ for what they hope to receive from him. Jesus addressed such as these after he fed the 5,000, saying, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (Jn. 6:26). Some care little about the spiritual implications of Jesus' miracles and teaching, but much more about the good with which Jesus might endow them. That's the way it must have been for some of the people in Capernaum. Of course, how nice it would be to have Jesus Christ make us better when we have a fever, or to make us rich when we are poor, or to give us some prestige when we are insignificant. **It is natural to want a magic Saviour and Healer.** But we ought to always remember that **God is not someone to be used.** God is to be worshipped, loved and served regardless of what comes our way. Healing and betterment are simply signs of God's amazing grace.

Thus, in spite of the fact that Jesus might have been used, **we see his heart,** for he genuinely cared about the physical and emotional plight of the people who came to him, regardless of their motivations. I'm sure Jesus hoped to direct them to spiritual realities through his touch, but no matter what the recipients might have thought, he gladly, lovingly and gently healed them. His compassionate heart beat far into the night in Capernaum. That same heart beats for us today. Jesus tirelessly ministers to all who come to him.

Capernaum was exalted to heaven that day and night, for deeds worthy of heaven had been done there. Parents and children would recount the deeds of this Sabbath with detail and devotion in the years to come.

3. **Jesus' heart: a predawn prayer** (Mk. 1:35-39).

Yet the story doesn't stop there, because that wonderful evening was followed by an equally wonderful Sunday morning, as verse 35 reveals: "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." Either Jesus had gotten as much sleep as he needed, or he had awoken early because his heart and mind were filled with all kinds of things and he couldn't sleep any longer. I've had nights like that too. In any case, it was dark, and everyone else was asleep in the house. He noiselessly tiptoed out of his bedroom and found his way to the street. Soon he was out of town and climbing a hillside in some remote spot, possibly a hidden hollow, where he lifted up his soul in prayer to God.

What did Jesus pray? I don't really know. The passage doesn't tell us. To be sure, not exactly the same as we pray. Often many of us structure our prayer time with the acrostic ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. Although he would've adored and thanked his Father in heaven, Jesus would not have needed to confess anything to God. He was sinless and he and the Father were in perfect harmony. But, I think **he would have prayed for himself**. Everything had been pulled out of him the previous day and evening. No doubt, he was still exhausted. Perhaps he was empty. And certainly, what lay along the road before him would be the greatest challenge ever conceived for any man. He needed to gird up his courage and strength. I'm sure **he also prayed for his fledgling disciples**, one by one. Remember what he'd later say to Peter, "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, [you will] strengthen your brothers" (Lk. 22:31-32). Before the Adversary ever made his moves, Jesus was praying for each of his disciples. And, then, as the context suggests, **Jesus also prayed for the people** to whom he'd just ministered, and for others whom he'd soon meet. He would've prayed for their continued healing, for some new challenge to their thinking and acting, and also for their spiritual salvation. He saw what was in Capernaum, and he knew what he'd encounter soon enough in coming days.

Missionary statesman **E. Stanley Jones** once described prayer as a "time exposure to God" (*A Song of Ascents*, 1979, p. 383). He used the analogy of his life being like a photographic plate which, when exposed to God, would progressively bear the image of God in keeping with the length of exposure.

Jesus exposed his humanity to God, even though he needed no more of the fullness of God (Col. 2:8-9), being already the exact representation of God's nature (Heb. 1:3). Yet he was wonderfully refreshed as his light was exposed to the Father's light, his purity to the Father's purity, his life to God's life, his love to God's love.

But there was also **a human reason for Jesus' prayers**, for we must remember that though Jesus was God he did not live his life on earth as God apart from the Father, but rather as a man, just like us, living life in dependence upon God. He said, "[T]he Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing" (Jn. 5:19a). "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (Jn. 14:10). Jesus depended upon his Father to show him the way and to effectively do what he did. Jesus depended upon God for his power.

One of the reasons Jesus did this was because **he wants us to live our lives upon the same basis**. If Jesus prayed in order to live a godly life, full of power, so must we! This is an overpowering argument. Jesus Christ is the eternal God, Incarnate, who holds everything together by his power (Col. 1:16); yet, he still lived by and in prayer! Jesus prayed; so must we. Prayer – simple conversation with God -- is the great necessity of our Christian life. We need to pray daily. We need to find times to get away alone. We need to get up early, or to stay up late, if necessary. True, few of us are called to spend many hours in prayer, as some are, but all of us must spend some time in prayer if we wish to keep our relationship with God sweet and in tune. **Find a safe and quiet place to do it**. If it is impossible when the family is awake, pray before they get up. If you have no place you can do this at home, find a place to park your car, perhaps on the way to or from work, and pray in the anonymity of the passing traffic.

Jesus was alone in his particular deserted place praying, **but even there he wasn't safe from interruption**. Mark tells us that soon enough, "Simon and his companions hunted for him. And when they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you'" (1:36-37). It's difficult to get away completely. There are always people – family, or friends, or colleagues – who will want your attention. There are always people who will say, as they said to our Lord, "Jesus, things are going great guns after last night; let's go back and get going and capitalize on it." Notice Jesus' response. "Let's go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do" (1:38).

Prayer gave Jesus perspective and resolution. He had a limited amount of time while he was here on earth; he wanted to move on. So he helped his disciples see that they needed to go somewhere else. “And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons” (1:39).

I sense **the healing heart of Jesus was not as interested in physical healing as in spiritual healing.** He refused to let his disciples, or the people he'd healed that Sabbath day in Capernaum, hang on to him as their own perpetual, personal healer. He knew he needed to move on, out into the country, preaching and teaching the gospel of belief and repentance. Of course, Jesus did heal people, and he still heals today. God heals! I believe there's such a thing as “divine healing” – miraculously or naturally, through the amazing healing power of the body itself, and through the skilled and gifted healing work of doctors, nurses, and technicians. But physical healing is only part of the gospel story. **Physical healing is temporary at best.** What Jesus emphasized was the healing of the spirit and the healing of the heart, healing from discouragement, bitterness, hatred, anger and the like. **Ultimately, the healing of the human heart is eternal!** This is where Jesus the healer's heart was!

That memorable Sabbath day and evening, and the Sunday following, revealed wonderful things about **the heart of the Healer**, a heart full of compassion and love. The outstretched hand to Simon Peter's mother-in-law revealed the reflex of Christ's loving heart. This heart laboured tirelessly, well into the night, to bring healing to needy men and women, young people and children. This is still true today. Moreover, the great Physician's heart was and is a heart that lived and still lives in prayer. His heart desires above all else that we experience the ultimate healing of our spirits and souls.

Jesus Christ wants to bring his healing touch to your life and mine.

Will you allow him heal you today?

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
 Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC
 The Reign of Christ the King Sunday, November 21, 2010

