

<sup>29</sup> After leaving the synagogue, Jesus, James, and John went home with Simon and Andrew. <sup>30</sup> Simon's mother-in-law was in bed, sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. <sup>31</sup> He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she served them.

<sup>32</sup> That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. <sup>33</sup> The whole town gathered near the door. <sup>34</sup> He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn't let the demons speak, because they recognized him.

<sup>35</sup> Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. <sup>36</sup> Simon and those with him tracked him down. <sup>37</sup> When they found him, they told him, "Everyone's looking for you!"

<sup>38</sup> He replied, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come." <sup>39</sup> He traveled throughout Galilee preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons.

Last week's Gospel lesson (the verses immediately preceding today's Gospel text) showed Jesus demonstrating something new in His preaching and teaching: something called **authority**, something called **power**.

As in last week's Gospel (and indeed all throughout Mark) Jesus demonstrates the inbreaking of a NEW THING -- the **PRESENCE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD**. Indeed, Jesus' whole ministry and life might well be summarized by His first sermon, as Mark records it, namely: ***"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news."***

A sign of that inbreaking power and authority is in **HEALING**.

The problem is (as Jesus often understood, in His admonition for people to not broadcast the news about the miracle of His wonder working power) is that **people don't see the miracle for what it is**.

**Wonder working acts of power can have a downside to it: THE WONDER WORKER GAINS POPULARITY**. To the disciples (then and now??) those **BIG CONGREGATIONS** became the **goal**, the **object**, the **"what it's all about."** **Success is measured by popularity, by attendance**.

Perhaps this teaching is even more important to us 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans than in days gone by. A century or so ago, as I read the history books, this country might

well have been described as a **CULTURE OF CHARACTER**. People were known for their character: their dedication, their loyalty, their hard working, and most particularly by their integrity/honesty. People were known by these qualities largely because people knew one another.

Then, just about a century ago, we entered into a **CULTURE OF PERSONALITY**. A marker of this change was in the work of Dale Carnegie, “**How to Win Friends and Influence People**” – a book still in print. Amazon.com says about it:

**As relevant as ever before: In the age of Steven Covey and Tony Robbins, Dale Carnegie’s principles endure.**

In the current **CULTURE OF PERSONALITY** we are taught all through our lives (beginning with pre-school) that the most important thing is that we must SELL OURSELVES, we must FIT IN, we must SOCIALIZE.

One of the popular self-help organizations for proper development of selling one’s self is called **TOASTMASTERS**. One of their exercises is **TRUTH OR FICTION**. The speakers are invited to tell a tall tale about one’s life, to see if you can sell a big whopper to the audience, based on your persuasiveness. **A successful effort will convince the audience of a big lie.**

Note the irony of that last statement: **A successful effort will convince the audience of a big lie.** That captures much of the essence of the difference between the **CULTURE OF CHARACTER** and the **CULTURE OF PERSONALITY**.

What Jesus did was the antithesis of today’s “where the medium is as important as the message.”

Jesus understood the danger of popularity based definitions of success. And today’s Gospel tells us HOW Jesus stayed on task, how He stayed in touch with the ultimate power, authority and meaning of His life and ministry.

He did so (as verse 35 tells us) by **going out into the wilderness and being in prayerful communion with God.** “Prayer,” as Professor and Storyteller John Shea so aptly puts it, “provides the clarity and direction that will be necessary.”

In her delightful little book, *Jesus, CEO*, Laurie Beth Jones makes the argument that Jesus did not try to follow the Walmart program for re-invigorating the Church. Rather, she contends that Jesus held firm to the **CHARACTER OF HIS MISSION** and demonstrates the superiority of that. Rather than the Church adopting PERSONALITY DRIVEN MANTRAS and SECULAR BUSINESS MODELS OF SUCCEEDING, *Jesus, CEO* demonstrates that Jesus’ Way is a more effective way to succeed – in life and in business. Her chapter titles reveal a notion of that content:

- He kept in constant contact with his boss
- He stuck to his mission
- He had internal anchors
- He guarded his energy
- He was constantly in a state of celebration
- He did not waste his time judging others
- He Felt a sense of destiny
- He prized the seed rather than the bouquet
- He did not despise the little things

**And, at the heart of all of that: Jesus PRAYED.**

Unlike those would-be disciples (of Jesus’ day and of today) who are distracted from the **Main Mission (the Kingdom of God is at hand)** by NUMERICALLY measuring success, by popularity in numbers: **“JESUS does not bask in notoriety. HE MAY CALL FOLLOWERS, BUT HE DOES NOT COURT FANS.”**

**SECONDLY**, in today’s Gospel lesson there **is also this issue of healing.**  
**Healing? Curing? Is there a difference?**

**Ram Dass**, an American teacher in spirituality, who “suffered a debilitating stroke in 1997, makes this distinction between healing and curing. **‘While CURES aim at returning our bodies to what they were in the past, HEALING uses what is**

present to move us more deeply into Soul Awareness, and in some cases, physical “improvement.” ... [A]lthough I have not been CURED of the effects of my stroke, I have certainly undergone profound HEALINGS of mind and heart.’ Therefore, HEALING can happen without a CURE.”<sup>i</sup>

John Updike’s poem *Fever* describes this difference:

I have brought back a good  
Message from the land of 102 degrees:  
God exists.  
I had seriously doubted it before;  
But the bedposts spoke of it with utmost  
Confidence,  
The threads in my blanket took it for granted,  
The tree outside the window dismissed all complaints,  
And I have not slept so justly for years.  
It is hard, now, to convey  
...  
But it is truth long known,  
That *some secrets are hidden from health.*

*Sometimes cure can threaten healing.* Consider this story of the case of a man named Fred:

“[Fred] was diagnosed with terminal cancer. After an initial period of distress, ‘something amazing happened. I simply stopped doing everything that wasn’t essential that didn’t matter.’ His terminally ill life became vital and peaceful. But the doctors changed their minds. He was not terminally ill. He had a rare but curable disease. ‘When I heard this over the telephone, I cried like a baby – because I was afraid my life would go back to the way it used to be.’”<sup>ii</sup>

Last week I heard from a woman from Texas that I got to know in the Academy of Spiritual Formation. Debi wrote about what happened to her during the month of December:

It started with a drip. A drip, drip, drip that awaken us from a restful sleep in the early morning hours following my husband's minor knee surgery, into an eight-week period of surprises.

- ⊕ A broken hot water heater that flooded our house,
- ⊕ the death of my special 99-year-old great aunt, and
- ⊕ my husband's ruptured appendix

were part of the dripping sounds that filled my weary body and soul as I walked these days.

Each time I heard the drip of a new "surprise" I felt the tug on my heart of my Father's presence and His arms of love wrapped around me.

- ⊕ Even when I was perched on a beam in the attic at 2:30 AM looking for the shut off valve for the hot water heater,
- ⊕ sitting alone at midnight while my husband's supposedly one hour appendectomy stretched into two,
- ⊕ eating turkey and dressing from the hospital cafeteria on Christmas day, or
- ⊕ while I was sitting with the lifeless body of my precious Aunt as she celebrated in heaven,

He was there. I didn't beg Him to intervene, didn't ask why this was happening; I just knew my Lord was there.

Why is it that sometimes it takes a drip or a flood to awaken our spirits and feel His Presence?

As I read Debi's account of those past few weeks, I realized that she both understood **the difference between HEALING and CURE**, and understood **how PRAYER is what connects us to that HEALING PRESENCE**.

Call it coincidence, or call it whatever you want. I also heard from another Academy of Spiritual Formation colleague. She, a medical doctor, is still wrestling with a demon inside her called Leukemia. She wrote a short verse which indicates to me that she also understands :

**You have taken my hand, O God;**

Lord, you have kept me.  
You have taken my hand, O God;  
Lord, you've formed me.

Take my hand and keep me,  
Take my hand in Yours;  
Take my hand and form me,  
According to Your word.

In a world in which SUCCESS is so often defined differently that it is in THE KINGDOM OF GOD... in a world in which HEALING is more important than mere CURES, I pray that we might all be connected enough through PRAYER that we will recognize what Jesus' life and ministry were all about: **the Kingdom is at hand**.

**And THAT is good news:** in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom: The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, p. 55

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.