

We begin this winter term, or Epiphany season, by reading Marks gospel, beginning right where we left of last week. Jesus was baptized, went into the wilderness to wrestle with his own demons, and emerged victorious, ready to begin his ministry. He calls disciples and then he starts. That was last week, and this week we read about what he was actually doing. Mark tells of one healing after another. 3 different scenes. A man with a mental ailment (unclean spirit), a woman with a physical ailment (fever) and an unspecified person condemned to isolation and loneliness because of their contagious skin condition. Man, woman, “a leper” 3 conditions that burdened all kinds of people, and Jesus offers, tangible relief. No wonder “the people came to him from everywhere”. Over the next weeks we explore the healings of Jesus. Today’s story invites us not shy away from the strangest of all, exorcisms.

We shiver when we hear the word “exorcism” because it evokes scenes of abuse by fanatics or people think of bad movies like “The exorcist” Then there was the terrible news from Panama 2 weeks ago. Its understandable that we feel uneasy when we hear gospel stories about Jesus driving out demons from shrieking people. This is all very far away from our day to day experience. So it takes a bit of intention to listen and understand what actually went on when Jesus drove out demons.

Clinical Psychologist Stephen Diamond writes in “Psychology today” that historically exorcism must be understood as an early form of psychotherapy. He sees many parallels between the ancient practice of exorcism by and modern psychotherapy: *Psychiatrists, he writes, usually firmly believe in the physical reality of the problem manifested in the patient's symptoms and suffering in their mental illness, and join with the patient in a sacred "therapeutic alliance" against the wicked and debilitating forces bedeviling them (my paraphrase) . While modern psychotherapy dispenses many hours of conversation and as well as prescription drugs, and the ancient healers had no time, skill and means to do so, there is a similarity: Psychotherapy he says, like exorcism, commonly consists of a “prolonged, pitched, demanding, soul-wrenching, sometimes tedious bitter battle with the patient's emotional "demons," at times waged over the course of years or even decades rather than weeks or months, and not necessarily always with consummate success. Hence the ever-present importance for psychotherapists, like exorcists, to perform their sacred work within a formally ritualized structure, making full use of collegial support, cooperation and consultation, and to maintain inviolable personal boundaries. To paraphrase Sigmund Freud, no one wrestles with the emotional demons of others all day without themselves being affected.* “End of quote. (Stephen Diamond “Exorcism as Psychotherapy: A Clinical Psychologist Examines So-Called Demonic Possession”)

Jesus drove out demons. In modern words, he practiced an early form of psychotherapy. He cured people's mental illnesses and addictions. We read in Luke and Mark's gospel that Mary Magdalene suffered from not one, but "7 demons" before she was healed by Jesus. Mental illness is nothing new, nor are addictions. We don't know what was wrong with Mary, but it seems that she was suffering a lot.

Jesus cared deeply about people who were prisoners to forces they had no more control over. With the means of his time he brought betterment of their condition and release from suffering. Does it help to see Jesus' exorcisms as an early form of psychotherapy? It made sense to me.

Now let us consider for a moment: How did Jesus actually approach healing and cures?

Given the huge potential for abuse when someone has a special power or divine gift, it's really important that this gift is used in a way that is mature and responsible.

Perhaps you have seen TV shows where so-called faith healers look at an audience, and say: "I feel that someone here has come with a chronic backache. You have not slept for days....you are in pain and that brought you here. The Lord is telling me that he wants to heal you...please come forward"...and inevitably someone will get up, get to the front and be healed. Whether it's friends of the preacher planted in the audience to get the crowd "ready" (as has happened) or whether someone really feels they are the one meant---this approach is contrary to the one Jesus took. Jesus let the people make the first step:

The people came to him. Friends and family brought the ones who could not move on mats and stretchers. Simon and Andrew dragged Jesus home to heal Simon's mother in law who was in bed with a dangerous fever (no antibiotics then, remember!)

Someone with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." It's important to remember that in 9 out of 10 cases people take the initiative, not Jesus. They want to get better. Sometimes Jesus even asks: "What do you want me to do for you?"

The people have an active part in their healing. They are not talked into anything, and they are not overwhelmed by lectures or speeches. They come because they trust Jesus.

"If you choose, you can make me clean" the man with the skin condition says. "I do choose" is Jesus' answer. The man is healed and Jesus tells him what he must do to get received back into society; that is he must show himself to the priests in the Jerusalem temple and then make an offering there and have his healing registered by the priests. In a mature relationship between doctor and patient there is this mutual respect. "What can I do for you?" Our docs ask at the Health centre. That is more than a floskel. You need to state how you expect them to help. The patient has the ultimate agency. It's also

important for us to remember that not everyone wants to be healed in the same way. It is wrong for us to assume that everyone in a wheelchair wants to walk.

That everyone who deviates from the “norm” in weight or height or ability is unhappy is obviously a wrong assumption. If healing is needed, healing can sometimes take the simple form of respect, kindness and ramps and elevators that get the wheelchair everywhere the person needs to go.

Secondly we need to point out that Jesus never asked for money. Healers in his time, good ones and quack doctors, all wanted to be paid. But The healing Jesus offers is a free gift from God. Others, women and men of means, fund this ministry. They feed Jesus and offer him a roof over his head when he needs it. But nights are warm in Galilee in the summer and Jesus does not need much.

Except: time to recharge. And that brings us to the third notable thing in the way Jesus heals.

He seeks time for solitude and prayer. I imagine he needed that so he could stay truthful to his mission.

So he could get that time he had to go to wild places, solitary places, where the crowds could not find him; where there was no cell reception so to speak. Where he was alone, with the stars, with the wild animals, with God.

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. “ writes Mark after Jesus has healed the mother in law of Simon Peter and presumable has been offered a bed for the night. After he healed the leper, Mark writes,

Jesus, “could no longer enter a town openly” (because he was so popular) but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.”

It makes me think of overcrowded emergency rooms and the frustration of doctors today who just dont have resources and personnel to deal with us all. In fact, when I read the line in Mark: “That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, “and Jesus healed many who had various diseases...that sounded like January in Annapolis Royal! Our doctors need their time off so they can stay helpful, and when they are understaffed that leads to longer waiting times also. Jesus was by himself and he was a role model. He took time off. Time to pray, time to reconnect with Holy Spirit, time away.

Now Do you wrestle with the question of how God heals today? Most likely.

Do you trust that God does heal diseases today ? and if so, how?

Its hard to understand, is it, that when we pray for someone-- some get better and others not.

Some recover completely, and others continue their decline.

Why?

I don't like most of the religious explanations that one comes across:
The person who did not get better- it was God's Sovereign will, we just don't understand.

Worse: The person had un-confessed sin.

And worse: Someone did not pray hard enough.

Such explanations would make me and others hate God in the end.
And they have nothing to do with Jesus, who goes out of his way to heal.
Who clearly states I DO CHOOSE!

Thomas Jay Ordt published a book last year which he calls: "*God can't*". *How to believe in God and Love after tragedy, abuse and other evil*". I got it from him last summer in Vancouver, and gave it to our church library when I was done reading it. I recommend it, if you want to go deeper into this question.

As many of us suffer from seasonal or more serious ailments, perhaps with Jesus we can all hold on to this: God always chooses to heal.

But God became flesh. There were limitations of how many people Jesus could cure in a day because his "flesh" got exhausted. We understand today that God's Holy spirit is not endlessly powerful. God chooses to live as LOVE within the world with its physics and chemistry and overarching rules. This love is not controlling and invites the world's cooperation. When there is no cure possible, God's Holy Spirit seems to be able to come often near us in a form of healing, an inner peace, acceptance, serenity, even joy.

Be flexible as to what you expect as result; but expect that God wants to make you well. As the leper says: "please, if you choose you can make me well." Jesus is upset. And then he says clearly: I do choose!: