

Therefore Came I Forth

Mark 1:29-39

“And all the city was gathered together at the door.” Well, that’s no surprise, is it? No one likes to be hurt or sick. Illness always brings discomfort, often makes you lose sleep, usually involves pain, and generally makes you miserable in one way or another. Moreover, sickness or injury is often accompanied by disability. And that may be the biggest reason that we hate to be sick: we are impatient to get back to business as usual, to doing the things we want to do.

And isn’t that what Simon’s mother-in-law wanted? No sooner had Jesus taken her by the hand and lifted her up, than the fever left her! No pills or shots, no side-effects, no days of waiting for medicine to work, just instant relief. And just as instantly, she got back to work. She got busy.

No, it’s no wonder that after such an amazing miracle, the whole city was gathered at the door. We would have been there too, along with so many of our loved ones. And what a joyful evening that must have been, as so many people enjoyed not just relief at the hands of a great physician, but the touch of their divine creator. Imagine those released from years-old ailments, from which they had long ago lost hope of being set free. Imagine the wonder of the child, as Jesus wiped away their bruises and scrapes along with the dust of the playground. Imagine the joy of having demon-possessed family members and friends restored, fully sound in body and mind. What a foretaste of heaven, and what an appropriate end to a sabbath day! Yes, we can imagine that the celebrations went on well into the night.

But when the disciples woke up the next morning, awaiting yet another day of miraculous healings, they found Jesus missing! Where could he have gone? After all, the text says that he healed many, not all, so some were probably still waiting to feel better. And anyway, the news had gotten out to the surrounding towns, so there would doubtless be more and more people coming to see Jesus for healing. So, why would He leave?

That question is quite personal for many of us today. Perhaps you’ve prayed for healing for yourself, only to see pain and weakness remain. Perhaps you’ve prayed for a loved one, only to see him or her continue to decline. Perhaps like these disciples, you’ve wondered where Jesus has gone, when you so desperately need to experience His power.

Well, since the disciples knew the area around Capernaum very well, and knew Jesus’ habits too, it probably didn’t take them long to find Him. And where was Jesus, when all these people with such urgent needs were clamoring for His attention? Where was Jesus, when so many people were longing for relief from their sickness so that they too could get busy, so that they too could get back to work?

Well, instead of immersing Himself in the busyness of ministry, helping the multitudes who were constantly clamoring for His attention, the disciples found Jesus by Himself, seeking God’s will in prayer. Yes, instead of responding to the pleas of His disciples to get busy healing people so that they in turn could get busy, Jesus was starting another day by spending time alone with His Father.

Well, how about us? Compared to our busyness, how much importance do we place on either individual or corporate prayer? I don’t know about you, but I struggle just having a short daily prayer-time by myself, as the day’s demands crowd into my mind as soon as I wake up. I am constantly tempted to put getting busy ahead of prayer. How about you?

But Jesus’ example reminds us that prayer should be the first thing on our to-do list. After all, Jesus is God. And even during His earthly ministry when His power was often veiled, Jesus could do the mightiest of miracles. As we saw in yesterday’s Bible readings, He didn’t have to pray that God would cast out demons: He had the authority to do that Himself. And as we see in today’s passage, Jesus didn’t have to pray that God would heal Simon’s mother-in-law: He just took her by the hand and her sickness left her.

But in spite of such tremendous power, in the midst of the maelstrom that was His ministry, Jesus insisted on going off by Himself to pray. By putting prayer first in His life, indeed by putting prayer ahead of getting busy so

that other people could recover from their sicknesses and in turn get busy, Jesus thus shows us what's really important. For the fact is that what we do doesn't matter nearly so much as what God does. And that's why prayer should always come before action – and should in fact often come in place of action.

For what did the psalmist tell us in our responsive reading this morning? Kings may have great armies, but they don't really determine the results of the battle. No, the psalmist says that it is the Lord Who brings the counsel of the nations to nought and frustrates the plans of the peoples. It isn't the strength of the warrior that saves him – it is God Who delivers people from death. It isn't the speed and power of the warhorse that brings victory – it is God Who is our help and shield.

And so if we really believe all that, why don't we act like it? If we really believe in the sovereign power of God, why don't we spend more time in prayer instead of worrying ourselves sick? Why don't we ask God to do the things that are impossible for us instead of continuing to beat our heads against walls that won't budge?

But if by putting prayer before action Jesus challenges our priorities, He also challenges us in this passage to re-evaluate which of our actions are really the most important.

Now, we've already seen that the disciples wanted Jesus to put greater emphasis on His ministry of healing and, given our current condition and the condition of our loved ones, we would have a hard time disagreeing with them. And we cannot deny that, throughout the ages, the Church has in fact built many hospitals to heal the sick. We've started soup kitchens to feed the hungry. It was Christians like William Wilberforce that put a stop to the slave trade, and Christians continue to stand up for the weakest in society today, for the unborn and those who continue in various kinds of bondage. Yes, we Christians are correct to believe we are called to help people with their material, physical needs.

But in verse 38, Jesus says that something else is even more important than physical healing, even closer to the core of His ministry: preaching, the proclamation of the gospel.

Now, does that really make sense? Is what happens in here more important than what happens in hospitals and soup kitchens? I think so, and not just because I happen to be a preacher. I remember something Mr. Robert St. John said to me one time – I think it was at a session meeting. I remember telling him about my mother's failing health due to Alzheimer's Disease and asking him to pray for her. He of course agreed to do that, but he also reminded me of something else: that all healing is temporary in this world.

Now, we don't like to think about that, but it's true, isn't it? It was for Mr. Robert. I remember us praying fervently for him when he got a bad infection at the time he discovered he was diabetic. God returned him to health and gave him many more years of life and service, not least because of Miss Jerry's vigilance over his diet. But eventually, in God's time and in God's way, Mr. Robert went home to be with Jesus.

And you know, the same thing happened to every single one of those folks that Jesus healed in today's passage. Everyone who experienced the wonder of physical healing on that day in Capernaum, even though their bodies had been made whole by Jesus Himself – all of them eventually died. No matter how long any of them may have lived, their healing in this world was only temporary.

In contrast to this, think about the sort of healing that comes from the proclamation of the gospel. For the good news is that everyone who comes to Christ, trusting Him as Savior and surrendering to Him as Lord is made whole. Oh, we may walk out of the church today with the same physical aches and pains, but everyone who trusts in Christ has, in a deep and permanent way, been healed, cleansed of our sins, clothed with the righteousness of Christ, restored to a right relationship with God and with our fellow believers. By God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, we are healed in a much more fundamental way than even those whose bodies were restored by the touch of Christ Himself on that day in Capernaum.

And the good news is that, even though most of us aren't called to be doctors, all of us can let people know about the kind of healing that comes from Christ. You'll notice in verse 38 that Jesus called His disciples to go with him to other towns so that they could preach. And that is still the calling of all of Jesus' disciples: to carry the Word of God into the world wherever we go.

And the good news is that we can do that no matter our age or physical condition. Whether we are sick or healthy, whether we are strong or weak, we can demonstrate the reality of Christ to those around us. In fact, the way we deal with pain and physical infirmity can be the greatest witness we will ever bear for Christ – for didn't Jesus show His love for us most clearly in His suffering?

And I wonder if that wasn't why Jesus needed to spend so much time in prayer, even in the midst of so many ministry opportunities. For, when it comes right down to it, the most important thing Jesus did for us wasn't something He did at all – it was something that others did to Him. For it was only by allowing Himself to be crucified for us that Jesus could bring us true and lasting healing.

Yes, it was easy for Jesus to bring physical healing to the people of Capernaum: that only cost Him time and attention and energy. But to bring true healing, spiritual healing to sinners like you and me – that cost Him His very life. With such a future in mind, is it any wonder that Jesus needed time alone with His Father at the beginning of His ministry just as He did at the end, when He poured out His heart to God in the Garden of Gethsemane? For what did He pray then? "Take this cup from me, but nevertheless, not My will but Thine be done."

This self-sacrificing God is the One Who delivers our souls from death. So why shouldn't we wait upon Him, drawing close to Him, seeking His face in prayer? This is the God Who doesn't just bring temporary healing to our bodies but permanent healing to our souls. He is our help and our shield, so why shouldn't we bow down before Him, trusting in His power? And since our hearts are glad in Him as we trust in His Holy name, why shouldn't we proclaim that name? Shouldn't we give ourselves completely to the One Who gave Himself for us, showing and sharing His truth and love wherever we go?