****

**Who Is Jesus? A Healer and Liberator**

Psalm 147

Mark 5:1-17

I doubt I am alone when I say that whenever I get sick, I am more than willing to take whatever is prescribed if it will relieve the symptoms of the current affliction I happen to have. For years, I had allergies in the summer time. I got shots. I did nasal inhalers. I took pills. If the doctors said take this, I took it, anything to feel some relief from the runny nose, the fever lips, the itchy eyes and the congestion. I often looked forward to fall and winter when at least the pollen would subside. Unfortunately, when the fall and winter season did roll around I seemed unable to avoid the colds and the flu bugs that inevitably make their appearance. Quite often the cold or the flu would turn into a low grade bronchitis that lasted for weeks, even months. Again, whatever the Doc could offer, I would take, antibiotics, prednisone, whatever was available, anything to relieve the symptoms that made me feel lousy.

People in the congregation could be grateful that I have a wife who used to remind me, don’t blow your nose into the microphone.

All of this changed when we decided to lay drain tile in our basement with a sump pump to get out the water. Almost overnight, I began to feel better. The mold in our basement was disappearing. I am allergic to mold and apparently that mold kept my immune response system constantly at work. It never got a break. It was tired. And because it was tired my immune system was leaving doors ajar, windows open in my body through which came all the other pollens, bacteria, viruses and everything else that made me sick. I appreciated all the medications and prescriptions I received from my Doctor, all of which helped with the troublesome symptoms, but what really made the difference was addressing the underlying cause of what was making me ill.

We are now in the third week of a seven week focus, centered on the question: “Who Is Jesus”? Who is Jesus for you, who is Jesus for me, who is Jesus for us as a congregation?” Our guide this morning is Mark. As we noted last week each of the Gospel writers weave together stories about Jesus in order to create a portrait, an image of Jesus, intended to address the question we are asking “Who Is Jesus?” Each of the Gospel writers creates a slightly different picture. To be sure they have overlap, there are familiar features in each of their images, but without question, they choose stories intended to put a particular image of Jesus before us.

Central to the portrait created by Mark is the image of Jesus as a healer. Reza Aslan, author of the Zealot, which our adult forum is reading, notes that healing stories fill about one-third of Mark’s Gospel. They include stories about giving sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, healing a paralyzed man, healing a hemorrhaging woman, and stories of casting out demons, including the one in our Gospel reading today. Jesus is a healer, about this virtually all Christians agree, conservative and liberal, progressive and literalist. Jesus is a healer.

There were, of course, other healers in Jesus time. It was not that uncommon to encounter people casting out demons or who offered healing for different maladies. According to Reza Aslan, and other Biblical scholars what distinguishes Jesus is that in contrast to his contemporaries who charge a fee, Jesus is offering his healing at no cost. Wherever Jesus goes, he sets up free clinics. Mark gives us a picture of Jesus whose health care program is universal and accessible. Surprisingly, Christians are unable to agree on the implications that Jesus health care program has for us today.

But, an even sharper point of disagreement for Christians centers around the question; is Jesus a healer who is primarily focused on the individual and the symptoms that individual has or is Jesus a healer that also looks at the environment? Is Jesus a healer who helps address the runny nose, the stuffed chest, the itchy eyes, all the things that can make us miserable or is Jesus one who also addresses the underlying causes that make us sick? Is Jesus a healer whose diagnosis is focused on our own individual lives or is Jesus a healer who also asks about our family, our community, our nation? What type of healer are we given by Mark?

One of the big blinders we all have in seeking to answer this question, is our strong tendency to make Jesus over in our own image. We assume Jesus would be right at home in the circles of people with which we commonly associate. Like the new Pope, we would expect that Jesus would be modest with the car he drives and the home in which he lives. But, few of us really expect Jesus would be living in a homeless encampment down along the Mississippi River.

It is therefore, helpful, quite essential, to know something of the social context in which Jesus lives and in which Mark’s Gospel is written if we are to avoid making Jesus into a middle class American and for many, a white American at that. The growing up years of Jesus would be more akin to a child growing up in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, parts of the Philippines, urban pockets in the United States or other places in the world where violence is a daily threat. Galilee, where Jesus grows up, like all of Israel, is under the oppressive rule of Rome. Rome has put in place Jewish leaders, like Herod and religious leaders, who collaborate with Rome by forcefully and without mercy, brutally putting down any opposition. A small minority live lavishly, while Jesus, his family and neighbors are forced to live a day by day existence.

In spite of all this, the Jewish people maintain a stubborn belief that the God of justice will redeem them and set them free from their suffering. There are many leaders in Jesus’ time and Mark’s time who claim to be the Messiah. Many of these so called Messiahs encourage violent resistance, which in turn brings down the violent hand of Rome, not only on those who resist, but all those in the vicinity. We are abhorred by the killing of innocent civilians in Syria, even though we have done much the same in Vietnam, Iraq and elsewhere. Such killing of the innocents was common in Jesus time. Entire villages could be put to death if an association with resisters was suspected.

Mark is in the process of painting his picture of Jesus about 30 years after Jesus has been executed and during a time when the resistance by the Jews and the oppression by Rome is coming to a head. In and around the year 66, the Jewish people engage in a full scale revolt. In the year 70, Rome not only subdues the countryside, but also totally destroys Jerusalem, killing men, women and children of every age. In the year 73, Masada, the last Jewish strong hold is defeated, when the remaining people commit suicide. This is the time in which Jesus lives and Mark’s gospel is written.

Who is Jesus? Is Jesus a healer who looks at the individual, seeking to cure the maladies of their bodies and their souls or is Jesus a healer who also addresses the broader social context that is the source of so much sickness and suffering? What type of healer is Jesus?

It makes a difference how we answer this question. If we see Jesus as primarily or exclusively focused on the individual, than our diagnosis of the problem will be focused on the individual. If we see Jesus also addressing the underlying root causes of illness than our diagnosis of the problem will include looking at the broader context in which the illness occurs.

Today’s Gospel lesson is a primary example. Jesus has just arrived in Gerasene. As he steps out of a boat he is immediately confronted by a man who we are told has an unclean spirit. He appears to be living in a cemetery, which is where Jesus encounters him. Although people have tried to keep him chained up, he has constantly broken loose. People hear him in the middle of the night, yelling and moaning and hitting himself with stones. Jesus responds to the man’s confrontation by asking his name, to which the man responds “legion”. Jesus heals the man by sending the unclean spirit into a herd of swine who then run over a cliff into a lake where they all drown”. If the healing of Jesus is only about this individual, than the diagnosis is focused solely on the evil within this man. The problem is his and his alone.

If, however, the healing of Jesus is also about the underlying causes of this man’s pain, than one reads this story quite differently. The evil spirits that have filled this man go by the name of Legion. Legion is a term also used for the Roman guards who are the source of oppression and persecution of the Jewish peasants. Anyone in Jesus time or Mark’s time could easily make an association between the brutal oppression of Rome and the suffering of this man at the hands of the Legion.

As with my persistent allergies, colds and bronchitis, the diagnosis will determine the prescription. A diagnosis focused on the individual means that you get an individual prescription. I received allergy medication and antibiotics. If the man Jesus encounters is primarily treated as an individual he will be offered individual salvation and if he is lucky, maybe a little therapy.

However, a diagnosis that addresses the individual, but also looks at the root causes of pain and suffering, puts us, as it does Jesus, on a collision course with Rome and every system of exploitation and oppression. This, of course, is why we are asking questions about a white stained glass Jesus and what this particular representation means for us as a congregation. Race in this country is central to the broader social context in which we live. Understanding and addressing the role of racism is no different than understanding and addressing the role of Roman oppression in Jesus time.

When I paint my picture of Jesus, I see a Jesus who is there for me as an individual with whatever prescription is needed, comfort in time of loss, hope in time of discouragement, forgiveness when I am unable to forgive myself, strength when I am week. But, I also see a Jesus who names those root causes, including in our country a heightened individualism, keeping us from truly caring for our brother and sisters. I see a Jesus who is unafraid to address the mold in our basements, because this Jesus knows God’s love and justice is never finished until all people are set free from the brutal chains that continue to oppress. The prescription Jesus offers is a Realm of God prescription that begins with the formation of communities who care about each other, support each other, and collectively live out the values of justice and love.

Who is Jesus? It is a question for you, for me and it is a question for us as a congregation? How we see respond to that question in many ways will determine the type of people we become.

**Psalm 147**

*In our first lesson the Psalmist sings with confidence about the healing found in God. The healing of God is extended to all who suffer, especially the outcast and excluded. It is a universal healing touched by the justice of God.*

1 Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for God is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. 2 God builds up Jerusalem;  God gathers the outcasts of Israel.  3God heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds. 4 God determines the number of the stars; God gives to all of them their names. 5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; God’s understanding is beyond measure. 6  The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; God casts the wicked to the ground.

7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre.   
8 God covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. 9 God gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry. 10 God’s delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor God’s pleasure in the speed of a runner;[\*](javascript:void(0);) 11 but the God takes pleasure in those who fear God, in those who hope in God’s steadfast love.

**Mark 5:1-17**

*In our Gospel lesson Mark tells the story of Jesus being confronted by a man who is possessed by a legion of demons. Legion is also the name given to the Roman guard who enforce the continued subjugation of the Jewish people, the exploitation of the land, maintaining the dominance of Rome. Jesus heals the man of the legion of demons by sending them into pigs, which in turn drown themselves in the lake. It is one of the many stories Mark tells about the healing Jesus offers.*

They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.’ For he had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He replied, ‘My name is Legion; for we are many.’ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, ‘Send us into the swine; let us enter them.’ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake. The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood.