

5th Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 2.4.24

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. (201)

Change has become a good unto itself.

Have you noticed this? Political campaigns will claim their candidate is the candidate of change, as if that says it all, as if there's nothing more to say, such as, for example, exactly *what* the candidate would aim to change and *what* the result of said change will be. Young people just starting out in the world are encouraged to become agents of change with no further word of the what and the to-what-end. Wanting to change to the world shows up in more than a few songs of recent decades—from blues to hippie-pop to alt rock to hip hop, like when the Beatles assured us in their song "Revolution," "We all want to change the world."

It's as if we've universally decided that the aim to change the world is itself a good. Without qualification or something to ground this relative term, change is the ultimate aim.

I had coffee not long ago with a member of Harvard's Class of 1970. He explained that his whole class had wanted to change the world. We were enjoying an outdoor chat on unseasonably warm November day. With that fact suddenly pressing on both of us, he said, "I guess we did. Just not in the way we meant to."

"Yeah," I said, "Can you put it back now the way you found it?"

Not that the way any of us found it was perfection.

And not that there's any going back. There's no going back. There's only going forward.

And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, but wasn't Jesus an agent of change? Especially according to the Gospel of Mark, especially in this, our gospel writer's, understanding wasn't Jesus was himself, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, also an unfailing agent of change?

Well, yes, there is that.

Yes, of course, Jesus was an agent of change. Utterly, absolutely, *immediately*, everywhere he went, wherever he showed up, he utterly changed everything. Things reorganized themselves around him. Things reoriented themselves, all things now centered around him.

He did this by his mere presence. Simply by arriving in a place, he would make things better, make things *good*.

And he did this, according to our gospel writer here and his understanding of Jesus, by virtue of his being filled with the Holy Spirit.

We're still in the first chapter of this gospel narrative, by the way—and just a few verses in, less than a full chapter, a *lot* has happened. Mark wastes no time in the telling. He follows Jesus as someone who was off and running.

And where it all began according to this telling is at the baptism, the baptism of Jesus by John.

There, at the baptism, it's said that the heavens were torn open, and the Holy Spirit came down like a dove and alighted on him, filled him. It's as if God, once so well contained up in heaven, had broken out and filled this man who would now make present the Holy Spirit wherever he went, would make present, as if pre-sent, the Holy Spirit, which filled this one man so to fill the world.

A contagion. It was to be as a contagion. You go to a party with Covid, and everyone leaves that party with Covid. Jesus shows up in a house, in a village, in a synagogue, and immediately everyone in that place catches the Holy Spirit.

This all happens immediately. *Im-mediate*, without mediation, without a mode or medium for the transmission of this Spirit: according to Mark it happens like that, which I've said every week in preaching from this Gospel of Mark—which, if you're getting tired of hearing it, don't blame me, blame Mark. Our writer will use this word forty-one times in his short gospel, and eleven of them will be in this first chapter alone.

Like when there's a kindling of light in an otherwise absolutely dark place, the darkness is suddenly gone. Darkness is absolute. All it takes is even the weakest flickering light for it no longer to be dark, for it to be changed, for darkness to have been set to flight.

Darkness is very wimpy that way.

In this same way the demons of the man in the synagogue couldn't tolerate the presence of Jesus. They could feel it right away. They reacted without a moment to think. Like the negative pole of a magnet, which can't help but to react and to reject the positive pole of another magnet. And the rest of us are like, that's just a thing that we can be near, that we can tolerate. We can't even tell it's there. But that negative pole can't help but to react.

We've just come from the synagogue with Jesus, followed him with his disciples back to the house of Simon and Simon's mother-in-law. She's sick. She's been sick. Not so sick, apparently, that they made a special trip. It's like they were coming here anyway and here she is, under the weather, in bed with a fever.

But it could have gotten bad. With a fever, you never know.

So, they told him about her. Immediately, they did, the story says: he's here, he seems to be able to make things better just by showing up, so let's get these two in the same room together, see what happens.

This is a tender encounter, especially when you compare it to the encounter we just heard about, a bunch of demons yelling in response to Jesus' presence and Jesus telling them to shut up and get out. The delicate language of biblical translation notwithstanding, that's essentially what Jesus said: "Shut up and get out."

But here, there's by contrast a tenderness. Jesus goes into the room, takes Simon's mother-in-law by hand, and raises her up, a proto-resurrection. The fever left her, an unwellness that can't tolerate the presence of utter wellness, absolute wholeness, that negative pole that can't help but to reject the magnetic positive pole.

He raises her up, in the very same wording as we'd hear in tell of the resurrection. He raises her up, and then she serves them.

Which isn't great—not on the face of it, not as we might hear this, as if like when your mom was sick and then was better and everyone in the household was happy cuz she could finally make you pancakes. That's how it might seem on the face of it. Finally, Simon's mother-in-law is better, and she can make us some pancakes!

No, the service Simon's mother-in-law offers here is spoken of in the Greek work *diakonai*, which gives us the word "diaconate" or "deacon," a position of service, yes, but in church an exalted one, in some churches the loftiest lay position of all. You can't be a deacon without a time of initiation. You certainly can't be a deacon until you've proven your faithfulness. In some very

retrograde churches, in an indefensible twist, you can't be a deacon if you're a woman. And don't even ask if you're non-binary. This position of service: so exalted, it's for men only.

But don't worry, it does seem to be for men here as well, not just women, in this gospel narrative—or at least that's suggested, though they seem to be slower in *getting* it. There's that time when, much later in the story, as they went along the way, the disciples (all men) were arguing about who was the greatest and Jesus sat them all down then and explained, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," that is, the *diakonai* of all.

And there was that other time, just a little later, when James and John walking along asked Jesus about sitting next to him at the table in glory, one at his right hand and one at his left. With that, Jesus drew a contrast between how the Gentiles use power and how the followers of Jesus were to use power. "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

See, there's a surprising glory in the sort of serving imagined here. There's a surprising power in it. To serve comes, not of a dynamic of exploitation or coercion, of the one with more power forcing service from the one with less. No, this comes from an abundance of power coupled with the recognition that power isn't to be an end unto itself but is to be used in service of the truer end, of the good.

It's so easy to think otherwise. It's so easy to think power is an end unto itself, and that the more power you have the better off you are, so the whole point of life among other people in the world is to have evermore power.

But power isn't an end, it's a means to an end, it has a point other than itself and its own accumulation. And the point is service, serving what is good. Power is the means to the end of abounding good.

That's what all these billionaires are about, by the way. More money than anyone could possibly spend in one lifetime, or even many lifetimes, such wealth is so abstract, so unmoored from any *actual* good, is all but *potential* good, all but potent as purposeless power, the accumulation of which is its own end, its own goal.

But *diakonai*. *Diakonai* is the action that comes of knowing this. *Diakonai* is the action that comes of knowing that power is for the sake of serving what's good so that what's good might

abound, and more and more people might enter into said goodness, life abundant, relief from suffering, companionship instead of loneliness, dignity and beauty and hope and joy. Alleluia, amiright?

And so, it did seem to abound. From this powerful service that Simon's mother-in-law offered, Jesus had ever greater effect, the disciples bringing all sorts of people in need—the sick, the suffering, the demon-possessed, and all the things that can't withstand the utter presence of God.

Change. He would evermore that day be an agent of change. *You* know.

A couple years ago, I read as much as well, something so obvious. But to be honest, I'd never really *noticed* it before, and it has stuck with me. It was that Jesus never said to anyone who was suffering that they should just learn to live with their suffering. He never even suggested that pain should be tolerated, loss should be gotten used to, humiliation as just something that happens to some people sometimes. He *never* said, "Everything happens for a reason," though lots of Christians seem to think he did. And he never said that God never gives us more than we can handle, though (again) some people preach that little tidbit as if they think he did.

On the contrary, Jesus seems, especially according to the Gospel of Mark, actually unable to let suffering prevail, actually unable to let sickness win the day, incapable indeed of letting any spirit other than the Holy Spirit to possess anyone with whom he came near.

And in this it is strongly suggested that such is the very will of God—that suffering should not prevail, that sickness should not win the day, that any spirit other than the Holy Spirit should not fill the heart and being of anyone at all.

This is strongly suggested because it is likewise strongly suggested, in this Mark's gospel most especially, that Jesus is the Holy Spirit made present, Jesus *is* the will and reign of God come near, made immediate and immediately felt.

And so, we can conclude that such is the will of God, that we not shrug our shoulders at suffering and simply accept that some just have it coming, but rather that whatever power we might manage to accumulate in life should be set to the service of relief, of gracious relief of all sickness and suffering, of all withering and hopelessness and warfare and violence.

So, okay, I'll grant you, in a certain sense, we are to be agents of change. But only in the sense that it serves what in the end is good.

Why are we shy of qualifying it? Why are we shy of articulating what end it is all to serve, the change we charge ourselves and others to bring about?

I will sometimes rearrange my furniture at home. I will do this because I'm anxious or bored or tired of how it's been. Or I'm trying to cope with the kids' comings and goings, mostly their goings, which I'm less than happy about. I do this and declare the new arrangement "better." But most often I know in my heart of hearts it's just different. Which is fine. Sometimes different is better, in a way. But sometimes it's just a way to cope.

There's so little we can do.

And there's so much we know about, perhaps now more than ever. We *know*, often in granular detail, of the suffering of this world, its sin-sickness, its dreadful woe. We know. And there's so often so little we can do.

It's like a question that often arrives to me when it comes to this gospel, Mark, which we'll follow this year, which is my favorite, for its raw urgency, for its desperate trying to keep up. But Jesus, as presented here, is such a singular figure and is so utterly the manifestation of the reign of God, the one in whom it is indeed true that the kingdom of God has come near, that it's hard to know where *we* come in, what *we*'re supposed to do about it—we who are *not* this so-singular figure, we who *not* the inarguable, unfailing, immediate presence of God who is good.

What are we supposed to *do*? We who long to follow, we who long to make the world better in some similar way to how he made it better: what are we supposed to do?

Well, just that. Look to what he did and then try to do it likewise, if in less immediate ways, if in more tinkering and time-taking ways, trying something here, trying something there.

Someone's sick? Let's learn the practice of medicine and let's build a hospital and let's try to make them better.

Someone is enslaved, labor never let up so never to come to fuller and more flourishing being? Let's learn the art of being human and establish a school to pass that on and labor together that no one person's life, or one peoples' lives, would be reduced to such a punishing toil while the rest of us have ever-wider horizons of hope.

Someone is lonely, isolated? Let's establish and participate in congregations whose whole purpose is to nourish relationships between people in a holy spirit of compassion and forgiveness and mutual care, as opposed to out there in the world where other people are as instruments for my wellbeing, or obstacles to it, or competitors going after what I'm trying to get for myself.

While we're at it, we might also admit our limitations, all the ways in which our efforts will fall short. We might also confess our sin, all the unforeseen outcomes our efforts might result in, suffering anew. Finally, we might trust that, where our efforts come to nothing or even make

matters worse, we might yet trust. We might yet trust that there is the good to be sought, there is a gracious power ever at work, and there is redemption for all that's gone wrong, even what we've made wrong.

These assurances are either the easiest things in the world to hear, or the hardest.

If they're hard for you to hear—not enough, not in time!—then you're hearing their truth. There's something of a deacon in you. Serve in this spirit. But also come and be served. The table is set. Come, rest, and eat.

Thanks be to God.