

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

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Luke 4:31-44

"Release"

Jesus has announced that his ministry is to proclaim the *"year of the Lord's favor,"* and this will consist of *"preaching the good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, release for the oppressed."* For various reasons, this has not gone down well in his home village of Nazareth, so Jesus descends to the lakeside town of Capernaum and demonstrates there what he is talking about.

1) *With Authority*

In the synagogue he confronts a man possessed by an "evil spirit," which Jesus rebukes and casts out. As with his teaching, people are amazed at the authority and power that Jesus shows. He proceeds after the synagogue service to the home of Simon Peter, where Peter's widowed mother-in-law also lives. She cannot serve them the normal meal after worship because she is sick with a high fever. Jesus rebukes the fever and it leaves her, and she resumes her task of hospitality, no doubt with gratitude.

Who is this who can rebuke demons and diseases? Unlike other "healers," he does not invoke the help of God or call on the spirits; he has the power and authority within himself to heal. People are amazed. That does not mean that they suddenly develop faith in Jesus, or ask to become his disciples. But they do take note that this man is different. Indeed at nightfall, when the Sabbath is over and "work" can resume,

people then carry their sick family members and friends to Jesus in great numbers, and he heals them all, and also casts out more demons.

So his reputation spreads rapidly through the area, and we catch the first sense that crowds are going to follow him wherever he goes in Galilee. He teaches and heals and exorcises with authority, and all this is worth hearing and seeing! But who he really is remains unclear to almost everyone. He has not yet called his first disciples, and his announcement in Nazareth that he is the "anointed one," the Messiah, has not reached many people. Ironically, the "evil spirits" appear to be the only ones who know who he is, and they are already in battle with him, typified by announcing his identity publicly - the Holy One of God - in line with the ancient idea that you could control spirits by naming them. The people's responses are more varied and more subdued: Jesus is clearly a healer, a teacher; a new and powerful prophet.

2) *The Kingdom*

That Jesus was known early on as a healer is never in doubt in the Gospels, or in any of the other writings of the time. Even historian Josephus knows him as healer. In the modern world, we are likely to debate whether the reports of healings are true; the witnesses of the 1st century had no doubt

that they were, but argued fiercely over the source of his power. Was he himself demonic, in league with Satan? Was he a magician, or a charlatan, or someone intent on leading people astray?

Jesus argued that the answer to that was self-evident in the effects of his healings. Marginalized people were restored to society, social barriers were broken, sick people were restored to vitality and to their families, and “the kingdom of God” was emerging before their very eyes. For the first time in Luke’s narrative, Jesus says that his task is “to proclaim the kingdom of God” in all of Palestine, so that he cannot, for example, stay in Capernaum and heal everyone there who needs it.

What is this “kingdom of God”? It is not political or military; it is the sphere in which God rules, it is the creation of his mighty acts of goodness, it is *the community that is formed by God’s acts*. What Jesus does in proclaiming the “good news” to the poor, in healing the sick, in releasing people oppressed by evil, is to create the community that he calls the “kingdom of God.” It includes demoniacs, the diseased, women, and crowds of the poor who “hear him gladly.”

The themes of Jesus’ early ministry are all therefore clear in just two chapters of Luke’s Gospel: his divine Sonship, his Holy-Spirit anointing, his battle with the devil, his compassion for the sick and the outsiders, his authoritative teaching, his healing; the varied responses people had to him; the beginnings of a new community of people he had come to create. And Luke slides in here two other themes that he loves to emphasize; that Jesus took special notice of women, and ministered to them as well as to men; and that Jesus often retreated into solitude to escape the crowds, and to pray.

3) *Jesus the Healer*

What then is the import of all this for the rest of the Gospel, and for the rest of history, including ours?

That Jesus the healer attracted crowds, but that he had other matters to attend to as well. That the kingdom that he was creating would include many outsiders, and very few insiders. That instead of heading to Jerusalem and preaching to high priests and scribes, Jesus would recruit his new kingdom from the rural poor and people from the fringes. That healing was one of the “signs of the kingdom,” and would continue even at the hands of his disciples in the future.

So does “Jesus the healer” have anything to say to us? Whether or not healing is a spiritual gift Jesus left permanently to his church has, of course, been hotly contested through the ages. Some would see it in the development of modern medicine. Some claim that miracles of healing remain widespread today, that certain Christians are gifted as healers, that “signs and wonders” like healing are a natural accompaniment to the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit. Meanwhile some people claim that all such miraculous activity ceased early in the church age. Still others believe these things never happened at all!

As with demonic activity, the Gospel texts about healing leave us with many questions about their application to our world. I would venture to say, parting company with both liberal skeptics, and with my very Reformed and my Pentecostal friends, that on one hand we would be very foolish to dismiss either evil spirits or miraculous healing as belonging only to the ancient world; and that both the New Testament and our own experience suggests these are realities that persist today. But on the other hand, that does not mean that demons are everywhere,

or that every claim to divine healing is genuine.

Where and how does Jesus heal today? Of course when we are sick, we ask for prayer. Every Sunday we gladly list and pray for people who are sick, with the implicit faith that God will support them through their illness, and in his mercy may be pleased to bring them healing. But I also believe that the healing that Jesus spoke of is most needed in those inner places of our being where even modern medicine cannot reach.

Psychotherapy may be able to put us in touch with those places, and even help us cope with them, but only a work of God can truly heal them.

I am thinking of the deep sense of abandonment that some people experience, often from bad experiences in early childhood, which stops them ever being able to enter trusting relationships, and leads them into risky and self-destructive behaviors even as adults. Only God can heal that.

I am thinking of the deep insecurities that make some people unable to function, or to perform ordinary tasks; others unable to hold a conversation that is not laced with defensiveness and aggression; people who can never admit they are wrong, people who are critical and judgmental. Only God can heal that.

I am thinking of people who are so disappointed with life that nothing and nobody brings them joy for more than a few minutes; who are always discontent, who are always looking forward to something that never materializes, whose moods easily swing into blackness. Only God can heal that.

I am thinking of people who have been so hurt that bitterness lives inside them and

poisons every relationship; makes them suspicious, accusatory, jealous; unable ever to forgive or forget. Only God can heal that.

I am thinking of people who have been betrayed and cannot ever trust again. I am thinking of people who have suffered deep loss, usually through bereavement, and are weighed down with grief and cannot be consoled because there is a gaping hole in their lives. Only God can heal that.

Every one of us could add to such a list from our own experiences, or those of people we love and long to help but cannot. I believe that only the touch of Jesus the healer, only the work of the Spirit of God, can heal those inner places; that only Jesus can release us from those bonds that imprison us *from the inside*. I believe and have seen and have experienced the healing of memory that I know is the work of God. So I believe in, and I pray daily for, the healing that Jesus can bring to deeply troubled people whom no pharmaceuticals or street drugs or alcohol or talk therapy or friendship can reach.

I cannot tell you how to make this happen; I have no formula or set of words or requirement of faith that will make God heal. So I pray, and I hope you do, for people that we cannot help in any other way – because we know that Jesus healed people on the edge, people nobody else would touch, people the medicine of the day could not help, people that respectable Jews stayed away from. And what the Bible tells of Jesus' ministry on earth, I have seen in people's lives today, and so I continue to pray for it.

And I also know that when Jesus heals people, delivers them from demonic powers, releases them from what imprisons them, speaks the good news to them, that they become grateful members of the community of the redeemed which Jesus called "the kingdom of God," and which we in this age

call the Church of Jesus Christ. So join me in praying that Jesus will continue his ministry among us, and in all the places that still need to hear his Good News.

Let us pray...