

Medical Mission
Sermon on Mark 1:29-39 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, February 5, 2006

Imagine if you will traveling to a predominantly Muslim region on the Asian subcontinent as a medical missionary. Think of all the risks inherent in such a venture: the trip overseas, the language barrier, the different customs, the scarcity of technology and resources we in the West take for granted. Now imagine taking that same trip in 1869. Imagine taking that trip as a woman. That is the story of Dr. Clara Swain, who left the United States to serve in India as the world's first qualified woman missionary physician. The ship on which Dr. Swain sailed was buffeted by high seas. When she finally landed at Bombay, her luggage was a week late. When she tried to leave Bombay, the horses pulling her wagon simply lay down in the road and refused to move, so she had to sleep outdoors. This delay forced her to miss the train to her next stop, which was still 180 miles from her final destination. Because she did not know the language, Dr. Swain found it hard to obtain food and had to fast throughout much of her journey. She finally arrived at Bareilly in northern India at 5:00 a.m. on January 20, 1870.

Although she must have been desperately tired, Dr. Swain got to work almost immediately. She wrote of her first day, "When I came out of my room in the morning I found a company of native Christian women and girls eagerly awaiting the appearance of the 'Doctor Miss Sahiba,' and with the aid of a good missionary sister I was able to understand their words of welcome and find out what I could do to help them." And help the people she did. After having to wait a month for her luggage with its precious cargo of medicines to reach her, by the end of the year she had treated more than 1,300 patients and trained seventeen medical students. Single-handed, she lectured in anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, and diseases of women and children. By 1874, she had built the Women's Hospital and Medical School, the first in all of

Asia. Through her medical work, Clara Swain was able to bring the good news about Jesus Christ to many in India, from the poorest of the poor to the governor of the state of Rampur.¹

Medical missions have changed considerably since Dr. Swain sailed for India, but the need for the work she carried out has not. Currently the United Methodist Church supports nearly 60 medical ministries, hospitals, or clinics in 35 countries around the world. The Church operates numerous hospitals, clinics, and care centers in this country as well. We do so because as United Methodists we believe that “Health care is a basic human right”² and because we understand that healing is a part of the mission given to us by Jesus Christ, the great physician.

We find Jesus in his work of healing in today’s reading from Mark’s Gospel. It is the Sabbath, the Jewish holy day and a day of rest. Nevertheless Jesus has had little rest, for he taught in the synagogue in Capernaum, and while he was teaching, he was interrupted by a demon, which he proceeded to cast out of its victim. After this dramatic exorcism, witnessed by an astonished congregation, Jesus retreats to the home of Simon and Andrew with James and John (1:29) to enjoy the evening meal and some conversation. Normally they would have been met and served by Simon’s mother-in-law, the senior woman of the house, to whom fell “the privilege of showing hospitality to important guests ... as a matter of honor.”³ But the woman lay in bed with a fever (1:30). Having heard his teaching and witnessed the exorcism of the demon, the disciples know that Jesus has amazing powers, so they tell him of her illness. Mark says that Jesus “came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her...” (1:31). There are no words spoken, only Jesus’ hand outstretched to take hers, gently but firmly setting her upright, restoring her to health. The woman is completely cured.

¹ Story taken from “No Rest for a Weary Clara Swain,” from What Happened This Date in Church History for January 20, 1870 found at <http://chi.gospelcom.net/DAILYF/2001/01/daily-01-20-2001.shtml>.

² *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2000* ¶162T.

³ PHEME PERKINS, *The Gospel of Mark*, New Interpreters Bible, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 546.

And having been cured, Simon's mother-in-law began to serve her guests. But Jesus was to have little time to enjoy his meal or time with his friends. "That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons" (1:32). Obviously word of the day's events in the synagogue had spread throughout Capernaum, and now "the whole city was gathered around the door" (1:33) hoping that Jesus would do for them what he had done for the demon-possessed man and for Simon's mother-in-law. It seemed that with each healing performed, each cure effected, and with every demon exorcised, the crowds only grew, a sea of human need surging up to Jesus. And he responded to their needs.

"[Jesus] 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" (1:34). The miracles were incredible, and the power Jesus displayed as a healer was fantastic. People afflicted with illness were cured. The demons that possessed people's lives were cast out. But as William Lane warns us, we should not read this episode in Jesus' ministry as a success story. Jesus had come to announce the good news of God's coming kingdom and to call for repentance and changed lives. His ministry of preaching and healing and casting out demons revealed something of the nature of the kingdom of God: belonging to the kingdom, participating in it, could change lives, and change them for the better. But that announcement of God's coming reign and the invitation to participate in it and be changed by it demanded a decision.

Jesus' purpose is not to heal as many people as possible in order to show them that the power of the kingdom is at work among them. His purpose is to confront people with a demand for decision based on what they see. The crowds had indeed decided to follow Jesus, but theirs was not the commitment of discipleship; theirs was the commitment of attraction to celebrity and power and spectacle. The crowds came for the thrill and the wonder and the excitement of it all.

And that would become a problem. How could Jesus go about his mission of teaching and healing and combating the forces of evil if no one understood what these acts of power really meant? What good was a mission that was treated like a rock concert, a messiah who might become Jesus Christ, Superstar? At the very outset of his public ministry, Jesus senses that things could go seriously awry.

And so, “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (1:35). Already Jesus feels the pressure of one who can do miracles, a public figure of whom much is expected. He must have been exhausted from meeting the needs of the crowds who pressed in on him with their sick and possessed. Despite his need for rest, Jesus woke up early in the morning, even before sunrise, in order to be by himself and to pray. Prayer was Jesus’ vital connection to God and his source of power and authority. Prayer was a necessary weapon given that he was battling the forces of evil. Prayer was also a way to stay focused on the task at hand.

Thus it is no coincidence that Jesus goes to a deserted place. The Greek literally means that he went to a wilderness place. Now since Capernaum was a well-populated city and the Judean wilderness was nowhere nearby, the “wilderness place” must refer to “a place of solitude which in some sense recalls the wilderness.”⁴ It was in the wilderness that Jesus had first faced temptation and spurned it. It was in the wilderness that Jesus dedicated himself entirely to God’s purposes. And so it is in the wilderness place that Jesus comes to pray and “to do God’s will, not to seek his own advantage or popularity.”⁵

It is the temptations of self-interest and popular acclaim that lie just behind Simon’s report, “Everyone is looking for you” (1:37). What are you doing out here? Simon wants to

⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974) 81.

⁵ Perkins, 543.

know. Why are you out in a deserted place when you should be with the crowds who are clamoring for you and calling your name? Jesus has been a number one hit, has played to sold out houses, has people wanting him to run for office, and the disciples mistakenly think that this is what Jesus was sent to do—to work wonders and make miracles and parade power.

Come, Jesus says, “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” (1:38). The danger is that like the crowds we get caught up in the drama and the spectacle and the show and we fail to see who Jesus is. The danger is that like the disciples we think that we as Jesus’ followers are to be where the crowds are and to meet the needs of the day. The danger is that we forget to retreat to quiet places, to spend time alone, and to pray. Jesus reminds his disciples—and us—that his mission is one of proclaiming the good news of God’s coming reign. His is a medical mission: to heal and cure and cast out demons and liberate those in bondage. Like those of ancient Galilee, we come to Jesus in need of his healing touch, and by his grace we can be healed. And having been touched by him, healed by him, transformed by him, Jesus invites us to share in his ministry.