

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, JULY 22, 2018 AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN  
CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A minister decided that a visual demonstration would add emphasis to his Sunday sermon.

Four worms were placed into four separate jars. The first worm was put into a container of alcohol. The second worm was put into a container of cigarette smoke. The third worm was put into a container of chocolate syrup. The fourth worm was put into a container of good clean soil.

At the conclusion of the sermon, the Minister reported the following results: The first worm in alcohol - Dead.

The second worm in cigarette smoke - Dead.

Third worm in chocolate syrup - Dead.

Fourth worm in good clean soil - Alive.

So the Minister asked the congregation - What can you learn from this demonstration?

A little old woman in the back quickly raised her hand and said, "As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"<sup>i</sup>

As my mother used to say, "different folks see different things differently." The various biblical commentators on this morning's gospel lesson live up to my mother's maxim with a variety of interpretations as to what the lesson is about and what we are to learn from it, depending on the portion we are examining. As you can see from the bulletin, the gospel lesson is split in two: the first five verses are actually the introduction to Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (which we will not learn about today); the second half with four verses follows Jesus' miracle of walking on water. Both are major stories in *Mark*, but the lectionary for this week skirts around them in order to highlight bits of the story that it was thought to be important for us to learn about the nature of pastoring and the necessity to find adequate rest to take on the job of ministry.

The first portion of the gospel for this morning begins with the disciples (here called apostles, for they had been sent out to spread the good news and bring healing to the suffering) coming back to report to Jesus all that they had done and taught. "It may be a small point, but we do see that the success of the disciples in their ministry is not measured simply by how much they accomplish. Having been out on their own, now they are called back to Jesus. It is the same with the Gospel. It's not a matter of how much we accomplish, but a matter of our relationship with Christ."<sup>ii</sup> In other words, no matter how much we do it's not about quantity; it's about the quality of our relationship with Christ that makes a difference. That is why we are asked to do the same things over and again: praying for others, bringing healing words and thoughts into their lives, standing up for those who have no voice or who have lost it - - these are examples of what I mean.

We're told that the apostles had so many folks coming and going around them that they did not even have a chance to eat. Jesus, ever the guardian of their souls and bodies, encourages them to get away and find some time and a place to eat, realizing that the nourishing of their bodies is important to how they find the strength to nourish other folks' souls. So they try to get away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. It's of no use, however, as the crowds follow them and run ahead to greet them and entreat them to heal them through the power of the Great Healer in their company, for the people knew Jesus was with his apostles. When Jesus landed he saw a large crowd, and he had compassion on them "because they were like sheep without a shepherd." You'll notice here that it does not say he heals the crowds, but because he has sympathy, mercy and loving concern for them, he instead teaches them many things. You might call it a healing evangelism. He therefore teaches them about the love of God and God's perpetual and everlasting presence among them. This is why in the verses that follow where he feeds the 5000, it does not ever note that the folks were hungry - - at least not for food. What they were hungry for was spiritual grace, the kind of healing that sticks with you and allows one to find healing within one's immediate circle or even from within oneself. But it's still best to have a pastor to lead the sheep. "Those who have seen sheep in person know that without a shepherd,

sheep move about aimlessly, wandering here and there, getting lost, and generally paying little heed to the dangers around them. This is the spiritual state of the people in today's passage, and we see that in Jesus' actions to teach the people." The care they need is first and foremost guidance in truth from the person they have reached out to, whether they realize or not that he is the Son of God.<sup>iii</sup> That speaks to us also, does it not? We look to our pastors for all sorts of healing to be sure, whether it be illness or impending death or just the little shocks that bring us back through our personal resurrections to wholeness. But we also look to our pastors as teachers, not because they necessarily have special insights but because they have studied how millions upon millions have viewed the gospel text for their own healing. This is why I try to teach as I preach, for the words I share have been taken up by countless throngs throughout at least 5000 years of history so that they might live and move and have their being. That's not to say that I don't have an original thought in my head - - I hope that I do - - but I am more interested in how the texts have been interpreted throughout the ages because there is very little new under the sun and there is so much we can learn in listening to and reading the thoughts of the past from others. Their joint collective on a subject, when brought together, can be very healing because we come to understand things in a way we had never imagined on our own. This is the danger we face with many of our representatives in Washington today because they are determined to ignore history in an effort to forge a new way. History itself is healing, and if they will not then we must be the shepherds who remind them of how well some of the old ways can be. I'm afraid we are caught up in dance where we are continually throwing out the baby with the bathwater, to mix a metaphor or two...What needs to happen is that we need to act - - not react - - but act as guardians of our history so that we will not be condemned to repeat the more awful parts of it - - instead of insisting that all we do create a new dynamic, one that is unmanageable. Every good pastor knows the sheep need a rest, and I'd like to suggest that we need a rest from some of the craziness of the day in order to move forward with any real sense of purpose. Hopefully we will find some quiet time for meditation and prayer so that this might be accomplished.

Coming back to the gospel now, we reach the part where after feeding the 5000 and walking on water, Jesus and the apostles land on the other side of the lake at the town of Gennesaret, and the crowds are there because the word has gotten out that the healer and his apostles are there. The country folk bring all nature of the sick on mats in hope, laying them about town and even in the market places so that should Jesus walk by, merely touching the hem of his cloak might make them well. And he does walk by, and the ill are healed.

One can imagine the impact Jesus makes when one considers what has been left out of the story; surely, the feeding of 5000 and the walking on water are big ticket items which fill this kind of biblical parentheses with all one needs to know to interpret it more concisely. Sadly, and purposefully, the folks who put together the lectionary had another concept in mind. Can (they wonder) Jesus miracles, of which we managed to skip two of the most important in *Mark*, be more deeply understood by what happens before and after their stories? In other words, do we learn anything about these two miracles simply by reading the introduction and the conclusion to the text? It's hard to get into this discussion without the benefit of what has been left out. Here we are at the mercy of what is known as higher German biblical criticism that takes into consideration the before and after of a text as critical to its understanding. In this case, resting and faith in the ability of the healer to heal merely by his physical presence say a lot about how we are to be healed ourselves, as well as why this is the good news of God in Christ. "It is God's action, built on the hope and practical compassion of the sick and their caring friends,"<sup>iv</sup> and like the feeding of the 5000 it is a sign of the kingdom, the beloved community of God. For when folks are healed because of the love shown them by their neighbors, the community has broken through and becomes real.

I'm reminded of the story of a healing Pastor who came to a revival at a small church in the country. There was a long line to see him. It was a little boy's turn in line and he said it was his hearing. So, the healing Pastor grabbed his ears and said a prayer. The Pastor let go and asked, "tell me about your hearing now." "I don't know..." said the boy. "I'll let you know on Friday, when I get back from court."<sup>v</sup> Healing has a lot to do with what we've heard and are willing to believe. I find the story of the touching of the hem of Jesus' garment fascinating. It's not

unlike the story we heard a few weeks ago where the woman with a consistent issue of blood was made whole by touching his tunic. You may recall Jesus was somewhat annoyed by it, but not here. He was either resigned to it or saw it as part of what needed to take place so that the many and the most could take part in his healing ministry.

Some biblical commentators gloss over these hem-touching accounts, explaining them as God's "accommodation" of the superstitious mindset of the age. Indeed, many fine scholars adopt this interpretation, and there is much to commend it. Still, in light of the Old Testament, there seems to be a better interpretation. In the Mosaic Law, God instructed the people regarding the corners, or fringes, of their garments. Jews were to "make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner" as a reminder that they were God's people called to keep God's commandments. It seems like a strange instruction until we learn that in the Ancient Near East, the corner of a person's garment represented his identity; it was a symbol of who he was and what he stood for. That's why Ruth, when she was seeking marriage to Boaz, asked him to spread the corner of his garment over her. It was a request for him to identify with her.<sup>vi</sup>

So important were the corners of a Jewish man's garment in ancient Israel that the Old Testament closes with a prophecy of the Messiah that references the corners of His garment: "But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings" - - wings are the corners of the garment. At the heart of the Messiah's identity would be healing—spiritual and eventually physical—for all who trusted Him.<sup>vii</sup>

This is the reason that in many Christian denominations the minister wears vestments. They are signs of his or her healing authority, their wings over the people. The fact that we do not use vestments here does not mean we don't believe in healing - - the banners over the table take their place and assume their function, at least to my way of thinking. Still, I think the symbolism has importance. Every time we put our arms around another's shoulders, as a greeting or a hug, we are sending Christ's healing into the world from the energy of our inner spirits in response to the Holy Spirit who is the source of divine wellness. So don't be shy about putting your hand on someone's shoulder. It

shows you care and it transfers light and life to all whom you touch, especially when done aloud in the Lord's name. This is the reason I find passing the peace, in the liturgy when it is done so essential. It is for many people not only the one time someone touches them all week, it is God's greeting and healing being passed on through the congregation. Lord knows, we could all use a little more health in our lives! We need only accept the truth that we have healing in us, and God longs for us to share it by being present one to another. We see ourselves as sheep when in truth we are all called to be the pastor. How the world would change if we all took on the pastoral role more sincerely!

Can we imitate the faith of those who reached for Jesus' clothing, and extend our hands in prayer that we might be spiritually touched by him? God help us and make us humble and worthy to receive this grace, his grace!

A final thought about healing I leave with you. It's a poem by White Wolf, called *Humanity*. He writes:

*Shadow not over the words of love  
Love is a language known only to the heart  
Hear it in the wind and the birds above  
Paint it on a canvas skin and call it art*

*Eternal beauty walks among us all  
Seekers of knowledge may know its name  
But true wisdom lies in hearing its call  
As the oceans causes the moon to wane*

*Its gentle touch, abundantly crystalline  
Euphoric in nature, its secret is kept  
With its healing powers all part divine  
Though many an angel from love has wept*

*Compassion and caring make love's trinity  
And kindness a guide that leads to bliss  
So make love your one and true reality  
For you are worth much more than this<sup>viii</sup>*

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.

Pastor, BBCC

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.emmitsburg.net/humor/archives/religious/heaven\\_8.htm](http://www.emmitsburg.net/humor/archives/religious/heaven_8.htm)

<sup>ii</sup> Hoffman, Mark in [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=375](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=375)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/sheep-without-shepherd/>

<sup>iv</sup> [www.johnmckinnon.org/mark6v53-56](http://www.johnmckinnon.org/mark6v53-56) <https://>

<sup>v</sup> [www.cleanjoke.com/humor/Healing-Hearing.html](http://www.cleanjoke.com/humor/Healing-Hearing.html)

<sup>vi</sup> <https://biblemesh.com/blog/why-were-people-healed-from-touching-jesus-clothes/>

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.poetrysoup.com/poems/best/healing>