

At the heart of being a disciple of Jesus Christ is a life of service. There is nothing really controversial about that. We just argue about *what* that service might entail and *who* we are called to serve. We value some service more than others, for lots of reasons. But today, as we worship together, it would be a valuable exercise to find instances of Christian service that often get overlooked. Maybe the challenge would be for our whole congregation, onsite and online, to engage in the task of acknowledging the service given to ourselves, to our church, to our community, paying special attention to those who don't get recognized very often. Over the last year we have begun to use the term “essential workers” for people in health care, our pharmacies, the grocery stores, public works, even the people who pick up our trash. We could easily identify those who don't do what they do for the recognition. Many of them, I think, have resisted being recognized. So this isn't a call to embarrass anyone in our church or community, but to recognize examples of selfless service.

The Scripture that we read today in Mark 1, I believe, issues anew our call to service. For many people, a commitment to “follow Jesus” might not seem compelling enough to move them out of the pew or from behind their screen. But a call to service, to engage in a specific act at a specific time benefiting specific people who are visible to us is the kind of call many are longing for. The call to discipleship has been echoed throughout the January sermons based on the opening chapter of Mark's gospel, but perhaps a more specific call is seen in Mark 1:29-39. While a workday at the church is useful and often necessary, it doesn't carry the urgency that a call to serve our neighbors does. For many, it feels a bit self-serving to focus on the church building. So, what needs in the wider community can our congregation support? Think of hands-on ministry, or consider raising capital funds for those who aren't able to swing a hammer or wield a paintbrush. There are any number of ways for us to rise up and begin to serve, making our worship and service essentially one thing.

A simple reading of this passage reveals that *healing* is at the core of this story. To plan or provide services of healing at Ken Mawr I suppose would be an appropriate response to this gospel story. But I also suggest that answering the question, “What are we healed for?” is vital. Can any of you guess my answer? My answer is: We are healed for a life of *service*! Moving from the first exorcism of Mark’s gospel last week to the first healing this week, does it seem to anyone else that Mark is trying hard to fill Jesus’ resume here at the beginning of his gospel? Heaven is torn apart at his baptism and the world is turned upside down from that moment on. Nothing is safe, nothing is sacred, and nothing is untouched. Except that *everything* is sacred and *everything* is touched. And *safe* isn’t really on the agenda of this fast moving Messiah.

*Everything* is sacred because there isn’t anywhere he is unwilling to go. He dives into the depths of the broken and the possessed people he meets. He encounters those who are out of control of their own lives, perhaps because of personal choices, perhaps through no fault of their own. What the community considered unclean, Jesus finds pulsing with the presence of God. What society stands apart from, Jesus comes close to and infuses with healing.

There is a big difference between the exorcism in Mark 1:23-25 and the healings in Mark 1:30-34. There are some sicknesses that require confrontation and some that need kindness and the human touch. The key, of course, is knowing which is which. To be honest we know practically nothing about the people involved in these events. According to Mark, we’re just in the beginning stages of Jesus’ work and the twelve are not yet twelve, but only four. So, after the exorcism in the synagogue, Simon invites them home, ostensibly to figure out what might be next for this new mission team. As they enter the house, something reminds Simon about his mother-in-law’s condition. Maybe he says, “Glad you’re here, Jesus, please keep it down, my mother-in-law is sick.” There is no asking, no plea of faith that happens. Mark simply says they told him about her. The next thing we know, Jesus is marching down the hallway into the mother-in-law’s room and takes her by the hand and lifts her up.

Think about that for a moment. Sure, we had that confrontation in the synagogue and the compelling call from the fishing boats. But nothing to this point suggests such a power. What in the world did they think as Jesus strides off to find the fevered woman and then pulls her to her feet? Need we be reminded about all the taboos of first century society—contact between men and women, laws of hospitality between guest and host, being in the presence of the sick, too many to mention. Yet, there he goes without so much as a word.

And the healing is also silent. No “*your sins are forgiven*” or “*your faith has made you well.*” He just grabs her hand and lifts her to her feet. Eyes were popping and necks were straining all over the house. Except for Mom. Mark, in what will become his familiar spare wording, describes the only proper response to a miracle such as this: “*...and she began to wait on them.*”

What did she do? That’s not specified. Who was included? Apparently everyone. She served *them*. Not just him. When we are blessed the blessing spills out on all those around us. We don’t just bask in our healing, in our own blessing. We share it and we get to work. Let’s be clear, however, she wasn’t paying a debt. She wasn’t earning her healing. She was genuinely responding to the blessing. All our work, all our service is in response to what has already been given.

From that small domestic scene, we move back into the wild world surrounding them. Word got out, hope stirred many feet, so they beat a path to his door. Mark implies that the healings and the exorcisms continued into the night. These first two had opened the floodgates. Jesus’ fame had spread.

Then we have a little leadership message slipped into the story. Jesus worked long into the night, healing all who came. But then, early in the morning, he slipped away, to pray, to breathe, to connect with the source of his strength. He was gone long enough to cause concern, because they went hunting for him. He took the time he needed. He kept his priorities, even in the face of the demands on him that continued. “*Everyone is looking for you!*” the disciples told him

when they found him. *Everyone*—the sick, the demon-possessed, the hungry, the needy, the demanding crowd—is searching for you.

Why did he leave? It doesn't quite feel right, to leave behind those who were searching, those who were hurting. But he moves on—not to avoid responsibility since he already healed and taught and drove out demons there. He keeps focused on his mission, even when it seems a bit harsh. It was his purpose to cover more ground in the limited amount of time.

You see, some would have us stay in one place and focus on those who were already there, those on the inside. Some would argue that our emphasis ought to be on the ones who belong, who have already come. Yet, Jesus says, "*Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come*" (v. 38).

What about those who are already in? Don't we care about them? To put it in terms of a parable from Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark, what about the ninety-nine? Don't they matter? Of course they do. But they have the community around them. They have the experience of Jesus that they can share with one another. They can build on the knowledge that they already have.

When we carry the name of Jesus to those who haven't yet heard—those who don't yet know him—we are making disciples, even as we are being made disciples. That is our true service. And that becomes part of our healing.

When we are healed, we serve them. We aren't just serving Jesus; we are serving them—all of them—any of them.

But when we serve them, we are serving him. Amen.