

**‘B’ Epiphany 4 1-29-12**  
**Celebration of Worship, Bethesda (MD) Presbyterian Church**

**Scripture: Mark 1:21-28**

**“Jesus the Healer: A Threat to Order?”**

It’s the first healing the first gospel writer decides to share with us. And the literary frame he chooses for this snapshot is quite remarkable, and quite unmistakable:

On the front end: The synagogue-goers *“were astounded at his teaching, for (Jesus) taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”*

On the back end: *“They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’”*

**The content of this story? Healing! The framing of this story? Conflict!**

**Jesus taught ... as one having authority. A new teaching – with authority. He commands; they, the congregants, obey. Not as the scribes.**

**... that is: not as the teaching elder – also known as the pastor. You know us. We are like those scribes.** We don’t command, and you need not obey. We are trained, after all, to please you. To say a good word over communal meals. To tell an uplifting moral story, and stop right there. To live law-abiding lives. To serve as house chaplain. To cheerlead ministries to fulfill their quota. To honor and enhance and publicize the church plant and institution at every turn. All good things ...

And yet: That’s all we – your pastors – tend to be. For you know us. Unlike Jesus, we’re risk-averse – especially on Sabbath days like today. Why should we be church-challenging spirit healers? Why should we be catalysts for change? Why should we lead congregational meetings seeking to define itself by its calling by God – and not by its own State of its own Union? Why should we challenge the reigning social order that surrounds wonderful institutions such as this one? Why

should we – why should *I* – do that? I am paid, after all, to pour oil on troubled waters. Or to perform surgery on our church's soul as painlessly as possible, with as little need for the therapy of discipleship that there can be.

For, unlike Jesus, I of course do not have the authority to perform an exorcism of any sort. That being said – and I say this gently – allow your pastor – your teaching elder – this much: **I *do* sense there is an unclean spirit among us – one that we can work, with God's help, to cast out from our body. One that takes at least three forms:**

- **I sense among us a spirit of preoccupation with our wounds.** Of coming to worship on Sunday morning more to salve our own worries and wounds – which is a good thing – than to listen for the better: God's way with our worries and how we are called to be wounded healers during the week.
- **I sense among us a spirit of picking at our wounds.** Of coming to worship on Sunday mornings and taking pains to pick at or pick apart this or that or the other thing, all symptoms of our disease. As if the joy that is ours from the hope of our healing – nay, the promise of our healing – is simply not enough. (As if the symptoms predominate in Jesus' healing stories – which of course they do not. They are not symptom stories; they are healing stories!)
- **I sense among us a spirit of frantically covering our wounds.** Of busy bodies within our walls, obscuring the wonder and certainly presence as to what sense of grief we may be covering with our carefully planned churchy ways. Our sense of busyness not only acting as a threadbare comforter for grief, but also shutting the door tight to what one Session member recently recognized is our first love: our living, interrupting, encountering God who changed and changes our lives.

**Perhaps you sense these unclean spirits, too – this “us”, as today's unclean spirit calls itself.** Preoccupations with our own woundedness, fulfillments of important Sunday tasks we then confuse with the kingdom of God, frowning at this

small change or this pesky habit in Worship when there's so much healing to be had in spite of it all. A spirit of orderliness which is ironically our disorder. Our purity codes of ritual Sunday morning cleanliness, if you will, which ironically can make us all purveyors of today's unclean spirit.

For perhaps – just perhaps – Jesus has something greater in mind than how we go to church and if we're “fed” by church and what we “take” from church. As if God's church was this building, this hour, this one time of Worship, and we were its consumers to be fed and doggy-bagged home.

**Perhaps – just perhaps – Jesus sees in us and for us something much greater. Sees us as a healing place -- both going and coming: a place *providing* God's healing for others, and a place *receiving* God's healing from others.** A place that flows through and returns unto itself this hour, coursing forth into prophetic work-week waters. Prophetic waters of healing in our community that disturb, as Jesus does today among us, our churchy status quo.

**For we are, after all, the church that named this town of Bethesda. And as this church that named this town, perhaps God would have us reclaim the biblical pool of Bethesda – Hebrew for “House of Mercy” – that named our church.** Especially since so many of our nearest neighbors offer, and need our spiritual support and leadership in offering, ministries of healing far beyond the average American community. Places such as: NIH ... Walter Reed ... Bethesda Cares ... National Naval Medical Center ... Del Ray Club.

**Two of our Session members – different from the one cited earlier – are way ahead of us on this one ... and I think God's Spirit may be nudging us through their words.** At our January Session meeting two Tuesdays past, one of our ruling elders wondered aloud, with Del Ray coming in 2-3 months, what opportunity does 200 persons engaged in spiritual recovery daily in our midst from compulsions and addictions present our church? Could we become, this elder wondered, a source and space for healing in much more of what we do? This Session elder sees his own leadership role as conceptualizing how we might do this, if we are being called to do this.

Another Session elder, at last Sunday's congregational meeting, expressed a similar place-of-healing connection our church could offer. One that also could cast out that self-wounded, wound-picking, wound-covering spirit from our midst. How can, this elder asks, we reach out to Walter Reed's new presence in Bethesda, and the returning veterans in particular who are being treated for battle wounds seen and unseen? One of those veterans, Marine Lt. James Byerly, has worshiped with us several times of late. James is a double amputee from the campaign in Afghanistan. I have recently visited with him at length; he is an amazing young man. As he puts it, he is angrier with and closer to God than he has ever been before. I have asked James, and he has agreed, to share with us a bit of his healing journey in the two coming Sundays of Jesus-as-healer scriptures. Stay tuned!

Del Ray ... Walter Reed: Two examples of healing places that threaten our synagogue-as-usual order. Places for our progressive outreach, perhaps, challenging our regressive "inreach". **And because healing places such as these *do* threaten our carefully ordered disorders, they would not only benefit from our spiritual healing. They would also bring us the healing we so deeply and desperately need.**

**The most healing moment of my week past came in that very way: When I most proactively offered a healing presence to others.** I was honored and I would say hesitantly delighted to be invited by Bethesda Cares' Outreach Specialist John Mendez to accompany him Thursday, pre-dawn, on an informal "street census". In other words, John allowed me to roam with him our uptown streets, and hang out with him in the Bethesda and Friendship Heights Metro stations. To network with the homeless who huddle there, the edges of each day.

John – who by the way was Rep. Chris Van Hollen's one special invited guest to the President's State of the Union address Tuesday evening – is an ex-Marine expeditionary unit sergeant. As a Marine, he received special operations training he was called to put to rescue use in Somalia and Bosnia nearly two decades ago.

I don't believe any of John's highly dangerous, high-adrenaline special forces work from those days could have adequately prepared him for the rescue

operations he's attempting to lead by bringing housing to the most chronically homeless souls in our communities. Or maybe it was because of that training ...

In any case, I watched, listened, and learned from a man who, like Lt. Byerly, strikes me as anything but the stereotypically invulnerable macho Marine. I watched, learned, and listened to him speak, providing to those awakening from their dark night's stupor fresh socks and snacks and hot coffee from his heavy backpack. And a McDonald's gift card, if they allowed him to conduct a ten-minute survey appraising their situation. (One did.)

(I actually knew one of the homeless men better than John knew him. John allowed me to take the lead there, telling me this man had always refused his survey. I chatted this man up, and while he offered some new information, he refused the survey again.)

As this pastor walked back to the church at 7:30 that morning, I'll give you one guess who felt like his cup was overflowing.

*“They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’”*

May they – our synagogue participants, you, we, this church – say the same thing. Say the same thing about those who would bring their healing ministries – and needs – to us. Those who would bring them, that our own uncleanliness might find healing in our outreach with them.

Our own uncleanliness: our preoccupied woundedness, our picking at our wounds, and our churchy busyness that would cover over those wounds. That our own uncleanliness might find healing in our outreach with them.

Whoever has ears to hear ... let them hear.

## Prayers of the People of God (excerpted) ...

(Adapted from words a Facebook friend of mine posted this week from the contemporary prophet Barbara Brown Taylor)

*Little by little, O Lord, we as churchgoers have become devoted to our comforts instead of your Good News: the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and cared for – if not by you, then by ourselves. They no longer distinguish ourselves by our bold love for one another. They do not get us arrested for championing the poor. They do not allow us to occupy the places where the unclean spirits are gathered, but to preoccupy instead. They allow us to blend in. They allow us to avoid what some would call extremes. They allow us to be nice instead of holy, to be good instead of well. And you, O God, moan out loud.*

You moan out loud, O God ... knowing that, deep down, we too moan inwardly. Moaning for the healing we need, but we don't yet know we want. Moaning for the healing we must reach out to you in your world to have. Moaning because we do not reach out – perhaps because we cannot write the closing chapter, perhaps because we know not how ...

## Benediction ...

Without God ... we can't.

Without us ... God won't.

Go with God – so we can.

For the Spirit will – if we let her.