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St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

The Word is the Work

Mark 1:29-39 NRSV, emended

As soon as Jesus left the synagogue, he entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to Jesus all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. He would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there prayed. Simon and his companions hunted for Jesus. When they found him, they said, "Everyone is searching for you." Jesus answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out here to do." And Jesus went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

From the beginning, Jesus is all about the message. After his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, we find Jesus in Galilee and the first time he speaks in all of Mark's gospel, it is to proclaim the good news, Mark says. The message is simple: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." This is the message that Jesus is all about. As Mark's gospel unfolds, we see that Jesus's message is fully integrated: it is what he says and it is what he does.

After his very first and very short sermon, he calls some disciples in order to teach this message and ensure its spread. Maybe they helped him really work up his material. And then, as we heard last week, he starts a preaching tour, beginning in a synagogue in Capernaum. But that's where things go off the rails. It starts with a man with an unclean spirit, and even though he politely asks the spirit for quiet, the word about Jesus's wonder-working spreads, and by evening - the end of the Sabbath day - a crowd had assembled, hoping to see similar wonders worked in their lives. This time he orders the demons to keep quiet, but the word still spreads

This little piece has baffled scholars for a long time. It is called "the Messianic Secret." Jesus asks those he helps and heals to keep quiet, but they proclaim it loudly. He could

be engaging in a little reverse psychology. We've just finished reading the first book in the Harry Potter series to Hope, and, at the end, Dumbledore says to Harry, "What happened [between you and Voldemort]...is a secret, so, naturally, the whole school knows." The gossip seems juicier if no one is supposed to know. On the other hand, Jesus could be asking to keep this secret for fear that he might be accused of magic or taken for a charlatan. But recently I've read from a couple of scholars, Richard Swanson from Augustana College and Alyce McKenzie from the Perkins School of Theology, who suggest that Jesus may have asked for silence because he didn't want his wonderworking to distract from his message.

There was plenty of work to be done in Capernaum. He could have stayed. He could have taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath and healed on the other days. He could have been famous. But would people have heard his message? The work was good, but, for Jesus, it was the work *and the word*. The work was the removal of obstacles to the word. The word was the life-changing gospel that the kin-dom of God had come near. The work was the transformation of lives. The word was the power to believe in it. The ministry Jesus inaugurates is holistic. It is fully integrated. What he does serves what he says. What he says informs what he does.

Jesus silences the demons, and, later, asks for secrecy from everyone he heals because he knew there were some things a single wonderworker could not heal. Not every wound shows a visible scar. Jesus, stuck in Capernaum, would not have been able to heal the pain caused by systemic oppression. Jesus, known only for wonderworking in Galilean villages, would not have been able to reverse the wounds of generations of despair. The word Jesus had to share was transformative, but only if it was proclaimed widely. The work could remove all obstacles, but only if the work was shared. The gospel, especially as Mark weaves it, is an invitation to *be* the gospel come near. To join in the work, to spread the word. The gospel invites us to the same fully integrated, holistic life Jesus lived, so that what we do serves what we say, and so that what we say informs what we do.

On the Sabbath day in today's gospel, Jesus went to the synagogue and preached to the men. That's how it was. And then, he went to Simon's house and healed a woman, Simon's mother-in-law. These are First Century gender lines, but he really just gets them all messy and blurry. But this is what is important: *all* of this was the word - the preaching and the healing - and *all* of this was the work. What he proclaimed to the men and what he did among the women - all of it.

Sometimes we think we help people in order that we can introduce them to Jesus. And I don't think that's the way this works. Sometimes we proclaim and sometimes we heal. Sometimes we listen and sometimes we serve. Being integrated, being whole isn't about step one and then step two. It is a dance. It is knowing what others need. Gandhi once said, "There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in

the form of bread." So we trust that the work we do is the message. And we trust that what we say is the healing someone needs.

Beloved, this is hard work. The word, the work - together - it is more than "being a person of our word." It isn't about promises kept. It is about believing that the message of Jesus Christ has the power to change lives - our lives and the lives of others - and then living accordingly. It about inviting others and removing obstacles. It is about healing, yes, and feeding, sheltering, listening, caring. It is believing and acting, acting and believing with our whole lives.

Amen.