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Osler Mennonite Church

Secure in Humility:

Isaiah 40:28-3; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Mark 1:29-39

Good Morning Everyone,

This morning's texts push me into an uncomfortable space. Particularly our Gospel text, which centers around the miracles of mass healings and exorcism. I fished around a little, reading before and after these selected verses, to see if there was a different angle to approach from, but it is just more stories about healings and exorcism. So here we are. The reason that these kinds of stories make me uneasy is because biblical interpretations often start to go into the weeds in terms of how miracles take place, and what demons are, and I have little comprehension of either of these subjects. I am stuck in my twenty-first century view point and find these acts extremely hard to comprehend. Luckily, none of us are here to listen to the limits of my intellect – instead we are entering the world of scripture and the wisdom *it* holds for us today.

In the world of Mark's Gospel, encountering these supernatural occurrences were an accepted and expected part of spiritual interactions. Healers and exorcists were understood as an accepted role in society; they fit the socially determined capabilities of the time. In first-century world views, while these actions were still significant events, their stories would not answer the flood of questions that come to my mind. That is to say, narratively speaking, the details around demonology and physical healing are not the lessons that concerns this particular scripture text. Instead, it highlights Jesus' very presence being what restores people to wholeness.

The first healing we are introduced to here is Simon's mother, who Jesus helps up and enables to continue "**about her work**". For those who were sick or possessed, Jesus' actions to treat the crowds that surround him would alter the social perception and personal dignity that had previously been diminished by disease and demon possession. It was not simply a physical but a social restoration, the beginning of a leveling between the different classes in society, liberating those made poor due to their inability to work.

Jesus' healings take place to restore the social wholeness that is denied to these people. These actions defy the social order that segregates the privileged from the lacking, which challenges the prevailing social boundaries. Jesus' acts were notable not because they changed the laws of nature, but because they challenged the structures of the social existence of those he interacted with. This is consistent with the character of Jesus revealed throughout Marks gospel; if the social order dehumanized life, Jesus challenges it and defies its structure.

What set Jesus' actions apart from other figures who performed acts of healing or exorcism was his rejection of taking on any note of celebrity. His first healing in our text is done in the privacy of a friend's home. After working for the liberation of the crowds, Jesus moves on to a new location. He does not stay where he is already renowned to build up a reputation, but chooses the harder path of crossing over a geographical boundary to continue to spread the work of healing further among humanity. Jesus has no interest in investing in a worldly reputation, he cares only about investing in the people of the world.

In Paul's letter to Corinth, we are also invited to cross over social boundaries, and to experience ourselves the liberation from social identities. However, this reiteration is a little more challenging to follow. For Jesus the image of solidarity is one of rejecting social hierarchies and uplifting those who are hurting. For those immersed in a social justice model of discipleship – this is not a hard sell. But Paul challenges the church in his letter to not only lift up other people, but to join them. To meet people where they are at, and to allow ourselves to be molded and shaped so that we are better able to commune with those around us.

To modern ears in a society that prizes individual identity, this is no small task. Even the language used in these verses caused me to become accusatory and defensive. I was suspicious of Paul's claims, wondering if this act of becoming **“more Jewish to win over the Jewish people”** and **“to the weak”** becoming weak, was an act of manipulation of others, if not outright deception. Commentaries confirmed that I was not alone in this reaction. In first-century culture, aristocrats also would have looked down on Paul's words. Apparently, the elite despised those who adapted themselves too flexibly, accusing them of pandering to the uneducated and reducing themselves. Knowing what Jesus had to say about the opinions of the elite, it felt like a good time to start questioning my initial reaction.

For Paul the governing force in his life was to invite other people to experience the love of God. Becoming **“all things to all people”** does not involve losing or giving up one's own identity. It is a call to clarify what exactly our identity is rooted in, and to let the other pieces fall away. To get up and follow Jesus, leaving everything else behind. This is an invitation to let go of the labels we take pride in, in favor of something simpler, in order that we can prioritize the mission of showing others the love of God, to bless them. It is a proposal that suggests dissolving some of the divisions in society that create 'us' and 'them' dichotomies. It will require us stepping outside of these definitions entirely and focusing on points of connection instead.

If we can be secure enough in our identity as children of God, we can become open to adapting the rest of our habits and practices, if it allows us to show hospitality, love, and connection with other people. Taking a moment to look over the 1 Corinthians text again, I want to be clear that Paul is leaning into aspects of himself that are already existent, not putting on a costume and fooling those around him. He is deeply Jewish in tradition. Through his liberation in Christ, he knows what it is to be free from the laws of tradition, and as far as being weak he is a man who has given up a powerful role as pharisee to become a traveling preacher who is either persecuted or jailed for his entire life as a Christian. To “**become more**” of these pieces of his identity is to minister to the people he interacts with by committing to an ethic of empathy and connection above all else. To find the common ground of humanness, so that others may see in Paul their own potential to live a life knowing the love God has for them.

It means embracing the multi-faceted aspects of who we are in order that we may find commonalities with all those we are called to love. Never letting one aspect of our identity become so prominent that it blocks off our ability to see the humanity in those around us. Jesus works to liberate the oppressed from being confined to their defined social status, and here Paul offers a freedom to people of faith from the limits of social identity that divide, rather than unite society. It is a liberation from the labels and identity markers that one feverishly clings to in order to feel important, or good, or belonging. It is a rejection of perceived reputation that only serves to separate people from one another. This letter argues that no human institution or distinction can separate a person from the esteem of God and therefore it should not come between us.

This is not an easy command to follow, when we look out at our divisive world, we can quickly identify that we are not like certain people. When I hear of Christians doing things I could never imagine doing, I am quick to assert that I am not *that* kind of Christian. When I catch up with a friend, I am quick to explain all the social distance protocols my life has had in place to ensure they don't think I'm *that* kind of citizen. When a racist action occurs in a restaurant in my city, I jump to pronounce that I am not *that* kind of white person. To preserve what I think of myself, my own identity, my gut reaction is to divide myself up from these other people, to separate further and create more distinctions so that *I* am not lumped in with *them*. Paul's words would argue that this is a very ineffective way for me to minister to the 'them.'

It is important to remember that the call is not to embrace the aspects of other's actions that are harmful or even hateful. Do not misunderstand this text to be an ancient version of the excuse "I was only doing it because others were doing it." No, it points out that perhaps a more productive impulse to bringing about healing and wholeness in this world is not to divide ourselves up further but to work to find the humanity in other people so that they too can experience the healing of the 'demons' that we wrestle with internally.

In Mark, we have a rather dramatic example of this. Jesus "**would not permit the demons to speak**". He is not giving a microphone to the proclamations of evil that had invaded a human life, that would only further divide this human from society. Instead, his focus is on acts of restoration, on actions of healing and restoring to the community those who have been cast out. Not to tolerate the invasion of hate, but to counter it by living out of a compassion that transforms those he meets. It is in separating ourselves from one another that hatred festers and thrives. We are called to the transforming work of relationship, the mission to spread love.

This is an exhausting call indeed. It is much easier to divide ourselves up and write people off than to commit to loving them. But know that we are not left to our own energies when it comes to this work.

"Have you not heard? YHWH is an everlasting God... This God does not faint or grow weary, God gives strength to the weary and empowers the powerless ... Those who wait for YHWH find a renewed power: they soar on eagles wings, they run and don't grow weary, they walk and never tire."

The metaphor of running here carries the meaning of being strengthened to "go on with one's life." This parallels the story of Simon's mother who "**continues in her work**" or "**ministry**" depending on your translation. It is not of our own energy and empowerment that we find the resources to endlessly connect with others. It is because we first find connection from God, receiving love and recognition that we are companions of Jesus and children of God. Secure and strengthened in our identity as beloved, we are renewed to find the strength to show others that this is also true for them. And in this way, to participate in Jesus' mission for healing and wholeness in this world.

Let us Prayer – *Thomas Merton*

O God,
 You have taught us that if we are open to one another,
 you dwell in us.
 Help us to preserve this openness
 and to fight for it with all our hearts.

Help us to realize that there can be no understanding
 where there is mutual rejection.
 O God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely,
 we acknowledge your acceptance of us, and we thank you,
 and we love you with our whole being,
 because our being is in your being,
 our spirit is rooted in your spirit.

Fill us then with love,
 and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways,
 united in this one spirit which makes you present in the world,
 and makes you witness to the ultimate reality that is love.
 Love has overcome.
 Love is victorious.
 Amen.

Sources Used: Believers Bible Commentary Series, New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Wisdom Commentary Series, Building the Strong Man by Ched Meyers, Thomas Merton Unity Prayer, Disunity in Christy by Christena Cleveland

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Go now, and trust in God's mercy for your strength.
 Proclaim the good news wherever God calls you,
 and do not set yourselves apart from others,
 but be all things to all people for the sake of the gospel.

And may God give you the strength and freedom of an eagle.
 May Christ be the bread that nourishes and renews you.
 And may the Holy Spirit be the rising wind beneath your wings.

We go in peace to love and serve our God,
 In the name of Christ. Amen.