

4 Epiphany B
Beyond Curing

January 28, 2024
Mark 1:21-28; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

In the ancient world and even in our world, there are two issues with sick people: one is biomedical. That's when your bodies don't feel well or parts aren't working right. For nearly four years we've read about how the coronavirus can affect our bodies.

The other issue with sick people is social. When ailments keep you from doing your normal activities with or for others. For example, not going to work, not going to school, missing a card game, or a worship service; those are the social issue. In extreme cases, sick people are contagious. They are separated from their families and friends. We've also experienced that with the COVID virus. It's as much a social disease as a biomedical one. It kept people apart.

Being cured also meant being restored by to one's normal place in society.

The man in our gospel reading had an unclean spirit. In Jewish thinking, anything unclean defiled everything it touched. One bad apple spoiled all the rest. People would avoid someone with an unclean spirit. People with an unclean disease like leprosy, were to stay separated from other people. I can't even imagine the looks and stares and gasps when an unclean person showed up when Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. About the closest analogy I've thought of is our phrase: "a dirty old man." "Dirty" doesn't mean he's got dirt or grease or other stuff all over him. It says something about his behaviors that are unacceptable – and people should avoid him. We might even think that he shouldn't be in church.

Casting out the unclean spirit was more than just healing the individual, it also meant restoring him back to his proper place in the community as well. We will see that next week. You all have to come back for that.

For a short time I worked as a part-time chaplain in an alcoholic rehab hospital. One of the biggest issues for the recovering alcoholics was how to restore trust with family members. Sometimes that social issue of trust couldn't be restored even with sobriety.

The church in Corinth was a divided church. There seems to have been all sorts of different factions within this community. Our Second Reading addresses one of the issues: meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Some Christians in Corinth had the convictions that since idols don't exist, the meat was offered to nothing, so it was perfect OK for them to go to those pagan temples and eat the meat or buy it at the market. It would be like us going to an Indian restaurant run by Hindus or a Japanese restaurant run by Buddhists. We don't see that as a threat to our Christian faith.

Other Christians had the convictions – long held in the Jewish faith – that such meat was defiled by being sacrificed to an idol – even if they don't exist – that they couldn't stomach eating such meat.

In addition, there is a connection between our heads and our stomachs. I gave one illustration to the children. Another one comes from a speaker I heard. He had grown up a Muslim in Pakistan, was taught, like in Judaism, the pork is unclean, defiled meat. It should never be eaten. He had converted to Christianity; but even though his new faith said that eating pork was OK, the first time he ate it, he didn't know the meat was pork – until an hour later when someone told him. He threw up. His mind, his conscience, had been so conditioned that pork was bad for his body, that his body rejected it.

Back to Corinth and the division there. There were certainly good arguments on both

sides; but Paul argues that regardless of your arguments about it, it is even more important to show love for one another. Paul states: “Food will not bring us close to God. We are not worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.”¹ Eating or not eating is not a matter of salvation.

Lutherans have a term for such things: “adiaphora.” Most literally it means, “it makes no difference.” These are things that are not matters of salvation. They are not commanded, nor forbidden in scriptures. They are issues about which Christians can have different convictions. Christians can be Republicans or Democrats or even Independents or Libertarians and be members of one congregation – we are to respect those differences – and maybe even learn from each other. Lutherans can be carnivores or vegans – and we are to respect those differences – and maybe even learn from each other. Lutheran churches have supported conscientious objectors to the military; and supported and encouraged military personnel and veterans. We respect one another’s convictions.

At the same time, there are issues about which Paul will not back down. Earlier in this letter, he tells the Corinthians church to confront a member who was boasting of his immoral sexual behaviors. Paul tells them to expel this person from the church – turn him over to Satan so that he might see the gravity of his sin, repent, and be saved on the day of the Lord.²

The purpose of such confrontation is always to bring sinners to repentance and forgiveness; to bring disruptive ones back into the fellowship; not to show off how much better and more right than they are. We are to pray for and seek social healing and restoration to the body for those who have been destructive to the unity Christ has given us.

Our Gospel reading declares that Jesus speaks and acts with authority like no other. When he speaks, things happen.

Two applications to respecting convictions: One, Jesus is the authority; not me; not you; not any expert. This means that whatever convictions we have about adiaphora – things that aren’t matters of salvation – are not as important as Jesus.

Jesus’ repeated calls for repentance means that we could be wrong. Christianity is not so much about being right, but about repenting – we could be, and often are, wrong. We are sinners. That’s why we need Jesus.

Jesus can heal divisions among people. Such healings doesn’t necessarily mean that our minds or convictions are changed. In fact, latter in this letter to the Corinthians, Paul uses the image of a body for the church community. All the different parts in our bodies, like differing gifts in the church, are necessary. We shouldn’t all be thinking the same. We shouldn’t all have the same likes and dislikes, talents and abilities. In a healthy body, each different part: ears, eyes, nose, tongue, hands, feet, etc., uses its unique abilities for the good of the whole body. Our differences are valuable. However, a healthy body also recognizes when something is harmful to the body, and the immune system starts to work to counter the invading cells. However, today’s topic is about the good differences within the body – how they need to work together for the good of the whole body.

God is in this place. We can tell from the marvels of creation that God likes a lot of diversity. We can see it in how different we are from each other.

The church is not about me or my pew or my favorite hymn or my family or even **my** faith

¹ 1 Corinthians 8:8

² 1 Corinthians 5:1-5

and convictions; it's about Jesus being **our** Lord; God being **our** Father in heaven – the authority of my life and of our life together. Jesus has died for everyone in this room. We need to respect every other person for Jesus' sake and for the health of this body of Christ.

A few years ago I saw this on Facebook – a saying from Henri Nouwen – a Roman Catholic priest and professor. He raises questions about his life as a Christian.

Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone's face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions. I must trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will bear many fruits, here in this world and the life to come.

What is not on this list: “Did I convince someone I was right?” The real issue for Paul is not one's convictions about meat sacrificed to idols, but how they treat those who have a different conviction about meat. Do they treat them as an unclean person – one to be avoided; or as a beloved sibling in Christ?