

WGUMC January 28, 2018 Mark 2:1-12
What the Word Needs to Hear: You are Forgiven

It's been one of those weeks when one news story has been inescapable. All week long we have been hearing about a doctor who acted as if it were his job to harm rather than to heal. It's a good thing that the Scripture comes to our rescue and gives us a story about the Good Physician, the one we can trust not only with our health but also our salvation.

Reading this healing story in Mark's Gospel reminds me of all the problems we have with modern medicine. For the life of me I can't understand why we ever thought that it would be a good thing to entrust our health to a system that is run for profit rather than by a Prophet. It just isn't right that there are some people who make an awful lot of money off of other people's misery.

But that isn't my only beef with the health care industry. The more specialized medicine becomes, the more patients are treated like problems to solve rather than people to serve. If

you go to the doctor's office today, you are a symptom. You are given a billing code. You will be sent for tests and maybe referred to specialists. And then you will become a part. You are a foot to a podiatrist, a heart to a cardiologist, a stomach to a gastroenterologist, and you are a pain to a neurologist! Medicine has become so compartmentalized that by the time a person has been poked and prodded and tested and prescribed, the personal has all but disappeared.

It's no wonder that so many people go for alternative medicine. They are looking for someone who will treat them not just as a part with a problem, but as a whole person. We hear a lot about holistic healing these days, but the truth is that science is just beginning to understand the mind-body connection, and we have a long ways to go. I doubt that we will ever manage to put mind over matter so that our brains will cure our bodies. That's because the connection is more

complex than that. A truly holistic medicine isn't just for minds and bodies, but for souls as well.

The problem is that medical doctors can't treat the illnesses of the soul because souls don't show up on a PetScan. You can't detect them in a blood test. Even Doctors of Theology have difficulty finding and defining the soul. But here's my best try: When the Bible talks about our being made in the image of God [Genesis 1:26], I believe that it is talking about our soul. Our soul is the image of God; it is god-shaped or at least has the potential to be.

You can think of a soul as a spiritual mold that our mind and body gets poured into so that we can be shaped into the image of God. Our soul is the container of our identity, and it serves as the contact point for divinity.

Sounds pretty. But having the right definition is not necessary or even very important. It's enough to know that if the soul is the image of God in us, then soul medicine cannot

come from us. Medical doctors can't treat it; only the Good Doctor can. When our souls get sick, we need Dr. Jesus. But how do we get an appointment with him?

The story in Mark's Gospel today shows us what a busy clinic Jesus is running. Right after he calls his disciples, Jesus begins healing people. In the first Chapter, he heals a man with an unclean spirit. He heals Simon's mother-in-law who was in bed with a fever. He cleanses a leper. By that time, the news is getting around and Mark says, "Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country and people came to him from every quarter."

So when he returns to his home base in Capernaum, there are hoards of people demanding to see him and the waiting room is full to overflowing. It can be very hard to get into the doctor we want to see and we often have to wait a very long time. We worry: will they read our record? Will they get the

test results? Will they take the time to figure out what is wrong with us?

With Dr. Jesus, you don't need to worry. You don't need any tests. Jesus already has your record. He already knows your diagnosis, which by the way, is terminal. But the good news is that he knows your prognosis, too. And that's eternal.

When Dr. Jesus sees the man who was paralyzed, he immediately sees not just his problem, but his whole person. He sees the connection between the condition of his body and the state of his soul. He knows that this man's paralysis has a spiritual basis and if he releases him from his guilt, if he saves this man's soul, he will heal his body as well.

Now I don't want to suggest that all physical suffering is caused by spiritual sickness, but enough of it is. And what the world needs more than pills and surgical procedures is a doctor who will see the need in our soul and write us a prescription for forgiveness. Forgiveness is the very potent medicine that will

heal the sin-sick soul. And without all that energy going to fight the sickness in our soul, we are going to have a lot more strength to withstand and the treatment we take will have a lot more power to heal what is ailing our body. So we're right back to the question: how do we get in to see a soul specialist? And will our insurance cover it?

The only insurance that the man in Capernaum has is an ambulance policy in the shape of four faithful friends. Even when we're sick, some of us would never go to a doctor if it weren't for people who love us enough to force us to go. If it's hard to get us to take care of our physical ailments, think how hard it is for us ever to admit that we have spiritual ones?

There are times in our lives when we are only dimly aware that we are heading down the wrong path, that everything is out of joint and starting to spiral out of control. That's when we could use four faithful friends to stage an intervention. How

many addicts do you think get into treatment by themselves?
That's about how many sinners find their own way to salvation.

I tell you that it will take heroic efforts to get any one of us to the Good Doctor. I don't know if our friends will have to carry us on a pallet or cut a hole in the roof. But they will have to carry a lot of patience and cut through a lot of our excuses before we will be ready for the cure.

What are we so afraid of? That Dr. Jesus will find out how sin-sick we are? As if he didn't already know. No, I think what we are afraid of is that Dr. Jesus just might be able to take our sickness away from us. While it's no fun to be sick, at least we get to stay home from school and have an excuse not to do anything. But it's scary when we think about getting healthy, because then God will be wanting something. What will God ask me to do? Where will God tell me to go?

Dr. Jesus says to his critics, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and

take your mat and walk?" Do you see the connection here? Forgiveness is what gives us the power to stand up. But then we won't have any excuse. We'll have to take our mat and walk. When Jesus forgives us, he lays a claim on us. When he cures us, he commands us. When he saves us, he sends us.

That's when we begin to see that sin is a lot bigger than us. Homelessness is a societal sin. It is sinful and shameful that there are so many people living on the streets in the wealthiest county in the wealthiest country in the world. Three years ago, when the police cleared out The Jungle, which was a very large encampment along Coyote Creek, they scattered hundreds of men and women all over our city.

In response to that raid, people of faith from many different churches met here at Willow Glen. Over the course of several weeks, we determined that we had to figure out a way to provide emergency shelter for at least some of our brothers and sisters. The Winter Faith Collaborative and the Village

House Shelter Network grew out of those conversations. Safe car parks, day centers and overnight shelters are now operating out of houses of worship all over San Jose, including next month here at Willow Glen.

All I know is that we could never have taken up this task, never carried this mat, if we hadn't first been carried to Jesus by somebody. We could never have found the strength to follow him in this way if we hadn't been forgiven by him. On February 7th, we will open our Woodhaven Guest House to fifteen medically fragile women who are in need of some faithful friends. It will be an honor and a privilege to show them by our love that the Good Doctor is in. If we need to, we will carry them on a pallet, but we shouldn't be surprised if they offer to do the same for us. The grace of friendship goes both ways.

Yeah, it is pretty scary to be cured, but it's pretty wonderful, too. Until we are forgiven, we have no way of

knowing how fantastic it is to be free. Until we are healed, we have no way of knowing how awesome it is to be whole. In just ten days our guests will arrive and while they are here, they will not let us forget what the world needs most to hear: "Your sins are forgiven. Stand up and take your mat and walk."