

In our readings this weekend, we begin a series of three weeks of Gospels and other scriptures that talk about healing. This week, it's a fever, and many demons being cast out. Next week, a leper. Then, a paralytic being lowered down through a roof. These readings give us a chance to think about what this part of Jesus' ministry is all about, and what it says about our relationship to God.

Today's Gospel said that Jesus, after leaving the synagogue, was told about Peter's mother-in-law who was sick with a fever. So he came to her, and performed a work of loving kindness. In last week's Gospel, Jesus shouted at a demon, "Be quiet! Come out of the man!" But in this passage, Jesus doesn't say anything at all. He just took the woman's hand, and compassionately, he helped her up.

Then after sunset when the Sabbath was over, and it was considered acceptable to do work again, the people began to bring all kinds of sick people to him. He healed them, again driving out many demons.

Given all these healings, and the fact that the next two weeks talk about healings as well, we might begin to think that the healings themselves are the point of the story, and there is no deeper meaning. But the way Jesus behaves tells us something different is going on. At some point, Jesus was able to go to sleep and get some peace from the crowd. But he woke up early, well before dawn, and went off to a quiet place to pray. His disciples barged in on him and, since they were certainly not able to help anyone at this point, told Jesus he was in high demand, even in the hours before sunrise!

Jesus, however, did not go back to save more people from sickness. He chose to leave the town in favor of going elsewhere, because as he said, he had come to *preach*. His driving force, as Paul would also later experience, was to preach the message of the Kingdom of God. It compelled him to keep going, to share the message of the Gospel with as many as possible.

It seems strange, probably, that Jesus did not always heal everybody and in every circumstance. On one occasion, he said it was due to the lack of faith in that place. But it also seems very clear that Jesus sees that his power to heal the sick and drive out demons is at the service of something even more important. For although he did not heal everyone, he did preach to every one. He left some towns while there were still sick in them, but he preached to everybody. Pontius Pilate, John the Baptist, the disciples, his own mother and father, the Pharisees and Scribes, the Samaritans . . . And these are just the folks he preached to that we have recorded. During his trial, Jesus was silent before Herod, but even that was a kind of testimony against Herod's false intentions and lack of interest in what Jesus really had to say.

Jesus healed people as a way of showing how much God cared for the poor--even more than he cared about Sabbath observance--one of the primary commandments of the day. The Lord heard the cry of the sick and the poor through Jesus. It was a sign that God was walking among his people, restoring them to life. But even more than that, Jesus healed to give credibility to his preaching and his message. We will see this

even more clearly in the coming weeks as more astonishing stories are told from the ministry of Jesus. The main point today is that, if you're going to teach, you better be able to back it up with the kind of actions that speak for themselves. Last week, the people in the Gospel story were amazed that Jesus could teach with authority, and not like the scribes, who had to depend on the authority of others. Now, in the beginning of his healing ministry, he will amaze people that he does not even have to call upon the name of God, or any lesser god, in order to make things whole again. Just his touch is enough. Jesus left them behind, to talk about what had happened, and to consider his words, which would remain with them and be even more fruitful than the memory of a healing miracle.

Friends, what does this mean to us today? We have two big ideas in this Gospel: healing, and the teaching that the healing supports. Both of these activities (both are acts of mercy) are still very much in effect in our world today, especially through the life of the Catholic Church. I'll say a little bit about that, and also mention a considerable problem that the Church is facing as it tries to apply the healing love of Christ to other.

Healing still happens in the world today. First of all, miracles of grace are still happening all the time. People regularly say that their recovery to health happened in a way that their doctors cannot really explain. Some are pilgrims to holy places, but others just come out of surgery having beat nearly impossible odds. Every beatified and canonized saint has miracles attributed to them--events that have been carefully examined by scientists and medical professionals, to make sure that we aren't just believing everything we hear.

But healing also happens at levels we would not call "miraculous." Recently someone told me about how their doctor came into the room and talked not just about test results but also about prayer. Therapists and nurses guide people lovingly through the long process of restoring health. My Aunt Annie was home with my mom last week, helping her throughout the week in between her treatments to treat some real discomfort and aggravating side-effects. Mom called her an "angel of mercy" just the other day. Hospice experts heal people even on the journey which leads to death--for not all healing is physical.

Catholic hospitals, hospice centers, clinics, and various services are all at the service of anyone who needs them. Catholic health care was founded on the idea that caring for the whole person is a part of the Gospel call. Catholics provide healing to people because it backs up what we teach, just like Jesus' miracles backed up his claims about the Kingdom. The Church teaches that the second commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself, and that we cannot say we love God if we fail to love our neighbor. According to Jesus' own Parable of the Good Samaritan, sometimes helping the neighbor literally means scooping a foreigner from an enemy nation out of the gutter and paying any cost to help him recover from being robbed.

I mentioned that the Church is facing a new problem as it performs this healing ministry for the benefit of all. Many of you have probably heard of the recent confirmation of the

decision of the Department of Health and Human Services, to require all health insurance providers to offer insurance which covers procedures and medical supplies that are contrary to Christian moral values. The Church is facing the unbelievable situation of being required by the government to help fund drugs which can cause abortions, methods of artificial contraception (which are considered intrinsically evil), and surgeries which render people sterile. The Church's stance on some of these issues is controversial, but that isn't the point. The point is that the Church heals in ways that are consistent with its teachings. It teaches that pregnancy and fertility, for example, are not diseases to be prevented. They are signs of health and wholeness. It teaches, based on science, philosophy, and every other form of logic, that life begins at conception, and that no unborn child should ever have to suffer the ultimate attack against its dignity. Based on these teachings, it avoids certain practices, and chooses others.

One of the founding principles, if not the founding principle, of this nation, was the gift of the freedom to practice religion unrestrained by government. The God-given, inalienable right of the conscience was enshrined and protected by our nation's founding documents, especially the First Amendment of the Constitution. George Washington once said, "The conscientious scruples of all men should be treated with great delicacy and tenderness; and it is my wish and desire, that the laws may always be extensively accommodated to them." And James Madison, who wrote the First amendment, said, "Conscience is the most sacred of all property."¹

Some would prefer that the Church teach different teachings, or offer other kinds of medical procedures than it does. They have a right to their opinion. But so does the Church. The fundamental issue at stake right now is whether the government can force an institution to betray some of its most deeply-felt values by funding practices it has always taught to be contrary to divine law. Members and leaders of the Church, individually, do not always have a perfect moral record, but what the Church *teaches* about the moral life is a part of divine revelation, which has not, and will not change. In an interesting twist, many people with no religious faith at all are siding with the Catholic Church on this issue, because if the government can restrict the conscience and beliefs of any church or private group, no one is necessarily safe.

At issue today is whether the Church, or any other private group, will be granted the exemption it has enjoyed since 1973, which protects the rights of conscience. The President and his administration have instead so far been only willing to grant such a narrow exemption, that not even Jesus would qualify for it, because he healed and served people from other religious traditions, just like the Catholic Church does today.

Archbishop Hanus, and many other bishops and leaders, are asking for our help on this issue. The question of religious freedom in America is so much a topic for concern in recent years that Pope Benedict has been encouraging the American bishops during

¹ My source for these quotes is an excellent letter to the Washington Post by Cardinal-elect Timothy Dolan. See <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/conscience-protection/index.cfm> for many resources.

their regular visits to preach and teach on the subject. We are being asked to contact our legislators and tell them that we support the same kinds of exemptions that have always been granted to organizations and individuals. We will not be distracted by talk of “fairness” when the Church’s own rights under the Constitution are not being protected fairly. There are bills in the House of Representatives and the US Senate right now which would restore the exemption protecting conscience rights. We need to let lawmakers know how important the First Amendment is to us, and pray that if a bill becomes passed into law, it will gain the signature of the President, who has not shown support for it so far.

The Church has been given a deadline of summer 2013 to comply with the new, unconstitutional law. Up to that point, it will still be able to do what Jesus did: teach and heal with complete consistency. After that, what will we have to do? Is it possible to imagine Catholic hospitals only caring for Catholics, so they can meet a narrow requirement? Or dropping out of healthcare altogether, leaving the already battered healthcare system in our country even more overtaxed?

Keep your eyes on the coming week’s bulletin and our cluster website for more information about how you can make a difference.

Thomas Jefferson once said, “No part of the Constitution should be more dear to us than the part which protects the rights of conscience against the enterprises of civil authority.” Two hundred and three years after making that statement, his words serve as a warning against doing nothing . . . and losing our integrity to teach and heal with consistency.