

Week 1: READ: Mark 4:35-41

Show Time

I had an epiphany today. Perhaps you have uttered those words. By epiphany we mean we had a revelation, a new understanding, or an "aha" moment. Oftentimes, these epiphanies are small fish in the sea of historic epiphanies. Take for example the four epiphanies in Mark's gospel revealing the identity of Jesus (4:35-41 – 5:43). These four manifestation stories are: the stilling of the storm on the Sea of Galilee – 4:25-41; the liberation of the Gerasene demoniac of his demons – 5:1-20; and two interwoven healing stories of Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman – 5:21-43. Each of these stories reveal something about God's capacity to work through Jesus and among people of faith.

Mark chapters 4-5 are a collection of stories that all take place in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. The way Mark has written his introduction to 4:1-5:20, it all happens in two consecutive days. First, Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God in a variety of parables to the crowd from a boat (4:1). That evening, Jesus and his disciples crossed the Sea of Galilee. Later he was awakened by his disciples and he stood up and spoke into the storm and calmed the wind and waves (4:35). When they arrived on the other side of the Sea, Jesus experienced a confrontation with a demon possessed man as soon as they got out of the boat (5:1-2).

The ship is an ancient Christian symbol for the church, the gathered Christian community. Tied to the story

of Noah and his family who were kept safe aboard a ship during the flood, the ship is a symbol of safety. In classic church construction design, the roof of the sanctuary is often built like the bottom of a ship. The technical term for the seating area in the sanctuary is called the *nave*, Latin for "ship." The fishing boat the disciples and Jesus were in on the Sea of Galilee comfortably held about twelve people (see Appendix 1 for a picture of a boat from this time period recently found).

There are some interesting parallels between the story of the stilling of the storm and Psalm 107:23-32. As an introduction to this Psalm, it is a community Psalm of thanksgiving vv. 1-32 and concludes with a hymn vv. 33-43. It is the first Psalm of the fifth and final book or collection of Psalms (Psalm 107-150). Because of its use in Jewish worship, it has a liturgical refrain seen in verses 6, 13, 19 and 28: *Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.* Immediately after this refrain in v. 28, which relays the story of trouble on the sea caused by wind and waves, God heard their cry and the sea became still v. 29.

Like the disciples, the people at sea in the Psalm who cried out to God in prayer were afraid v. 26. When God answered their prayer and calm was restored, they rejoiced v. 30. Another story of a storm at sea and sailors filled with fear is Jonah 1:4-6. The similarity to the Gospel reading is that Jonah, like Jesus, was asleep on the ship in the midst of the storm. While Jesus stood up and commanded calm into the storm, Jonah said the way to calm this storm was to throw

him into the sea 1:12, 15. While the captain of the ship in the Jonah story called for prayer, neither Jonah nor Jesus prayed. Jonah was the antidote the raging sea needed to calm itself. Jesus rebuked the wind and waves in the same way he rebuked demons.

Soul Sower

No one ever said life is fair. None of us choose to be conceived nor select our birth family. Every household is different with some being very peaceful and loving while others are very chaotic and unhealthy. On top of that, babies are born every day all over the world in amazing countries like the States and violent places like Syria. The storms of life are real and many suffer as a result. Yet, we all fight for this thing called life.

Carolyn's memory began to show signs of fading when she was about 60 years old. Like most people with failing memory, Carolyn compensated for it so that it masked her dementia from those who knew and loved her most. When you forget names, faces, where you put your car keys or even parked your car, it can be embarrassing. For some of us, we make it a joke. Others, try and talk around it or hide their chagrin. The latter was more in keeping with Carolyn's personality. No one wants to be laughed at or talked about behind their back.

The funny thing is that Carolyn would have gone out of her way to not talk about nor cause someone to feel embarrassed. She was a person of character, integrity and faith. In thinking back on her life, Carolyn eluded to the early years of her marriage as a time

when she became “lazy” in her faith. She was a busy homemaker with three children ages seven and under when her six year old daughter Vicki was diagnosed with rheumatic fever. The doctor told Carolyn and her husband Milton that there was a good chance she would not make it through the night. In a panic because they had not told Vicki any of the stories of Jesus, they spent the night at her bedside praying and telling her any of the Jesus stories they could remember.

Their prayers were answered and Vicki survived. This was a wake-up call to Carolyn and Milt. Like their parents before them, they began to bring their daughters to worship and enrolled them in Sunday School. In the midst of crisis, the embers of faith were stirred and Carolyn and Milton began to follow Jesus intentionally.

As a mother, Carolyn sowed faith into her daughters as they started a tradition of family devotions using a children’s story Bible, a devotional they pick up at their church and a few songs the girls had learned in Sunday School. It was these evening minutes spent together around Bible stories that formed and shaped the hearts and minds of their children. It was as much for Milton and Carolyn’s faith development as it was for their girls. It served to knit their marriage together as well.

In the last few years of Carolyn’s life, her dementia turned into full blown Alzheimer’s disease and she turned inward and stopped communicating. This was especially hard for Milt and his daughters who faithfully continued to visit her in the nursing home

day after day. Disease effects not only the patient but also the family. In the end, they celebrated Carolyn's life with tears of sadness yet a sense of relief. Carolyn was now free of the grip of Alzheimer's in the presence of the Lord.

Reflecting back on Carolyn's life, her oldest daughter Nancy recalls that in the summer time as her mom went out to the garden which was her sanctuary, her mom felt peace and joy. She often sang the same song to God: *Good morning Lord. Today's a brand new day. Won't you come along and walk with me every step of the way.* Nancy said that this was not just a song, but a prayer which expressed her mom's faith. With her shoes off and her toes and hands in the dirt, she was in touch with life, its organic nature, and the Lord who created it all. The seed of faith grew deep roots in Carolyn's heart and she worked to water and nurture this faith in her family. By the grace of God who alone gives growth, her daughters are rooted deep in the soil of the Lord.

Discussion Questions

- When you first read the story of the stilling of the storm, what captured your attention? If you have read this story before, what did you notice this time that you had not seen before?
- It was night time in this story when the storms broke loose and attacked the boat. Have you noticed how worry and fear at night seem so much more powerful than during the day? Think of a time when you awoke with anxiety or fear. What eventually gave you peace?

- Are you or those you love facing any storms in life? Name your feeling concerning that storm. Are you or your loved ones facing this storm alone? Where is God in the midst of it all?
- Next time you encounter a night fear, lay down, lights off, breathe in the light of Christ in your mind. As you exhale your fear or worry say in your mind: Peace be still. Slowly repeat this as you continue to breathe naturally until your soul is quieted or you simply fall asleep.

Notes

Week 2: READ: Mark 5:1-20

Show Time

The story of the exorcising of the demons from a man in the gentile area called the Decapolis is the third scene of an act tied together by their location: on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (See Appendix 2). In the first scene, Jesus gets into a boat on the sea so the crowds gathered around him on the shore can listen as he teaches about God's kingdom in a series of teaching stories called parables, "the kingdom of God is like..." Jesus taught about the farmer sowing seed; the secret way seeds grow; and a little mustard seed (4:1-34). The second scene told the story of Jesus falling asleep in the boat at night following the long day of teaching. When a storm arose, the disciples awoke Jesus in fear and he rebuked the winds (4:35-41).

The details of the man possessed by the legion of unclean spirits are captivating. The place of the dead is an ancient symbol of great fear. It was here among the tombs that this crazed man had been bound by chains in an attempt to restrain him outside of the city. The evil within him was so strong that no shackles could contain him. He was wild and endangered himself by bruising his body with stones as he ran loose among the graves shouting in loud outbursts. This man had so many demons, it took two thousand pigs to host this legion of unclean spirits. There was no Hercules strong enough to recapture him.

So what do we do with this story in the twenty-first century? Walter Wink, in his book entitled *Unmasking the Powers: the invisible forces that determine human existence*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986,

distinguished between outer and inner personal demons as well as collective demonic activity. He defines inner personal demonic, *By the inner personal demonic I mean a split-off or unintegrated aspect of the self which is not alien, but intrinsic to the personality, and which needs to be owned, embraced, loved and transformed as part of the struggle for wholeness...The biblical reference point for inner personal demons is not the stories of exorcisms, but Jesus' instruction concerning inner evil:*

Jesus said, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile...For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, (Mark 7:14-15, 21-23).

The way forward to integrate and pursue wholeness within oneself is not exorcism but rather finding God in the shadowy places of our person. It is as we receive the love, acceptance and forgiveness of God and apply it to ourselves that we move toward wholeness. Because God is with us in the darkest valley or the valley of the shadow of death, is not God also with us in the dark valley of murder, adultery, deceit, slander and pride? If we choose to live in the shadow of death and refuse God's comfort, then God cannot lead us out of the valley to the table which God has prepared a cup that overflows in life. So too, if we choose to remain in the valley of shame and guilt over

past sins, then God cannot lead us out to a table with dishes heaped and overflowing with forgiveness, healing and new life.

When it comes to collective evil, it does not take much recall to think of times when a group, or gang were enraged and rushed into action that brutalized one or more vulnerable senior citizens in public, raped a woman or went on a drive-by shooting spree. What causes "good kids" to turn on a dime and engage in blatantly hurtful, harmful, illegal and evil actions?

Wink refers to this as collective demonic activity: *Our century has known some of the most bizarre and horrifying examples of collective possession in human history. Charles Manson, James Jones, Adolf Hitler – each tapped a deep longing in their followers to be cared for, to belong to a movement that gave their lives significance, to surrender themselves to the all-wise power of someone godlike. Indeed, the very essence of collective demonism is explicit and avowed idolatry of the leader. Collective demonism is the abdication of human answerability to God and the investment of a final judgement in a divinized mortal* (ibid. p. 51).

The story of the man with the legion of demons in Mark 5 is an example of outer personal demons. While rare in our society today, it still happens: *These seem to be relatively rare, and are most frequently the consequence of dabbling with the occult or deliberately playing host to alien* (outside of yourself) *spirits. Automatic writers, mediums, Satanists, and the manipulated manipulators of Ouija boards are often unable to disinvite the guest spirits that they have*

solicited (ibid. p. 58). It is to this form of possession that Jesus and his followers have engaged in the freeing activity known as exorcism.

Turning back to Mark 5, Jesus had just taught a large crowd about God and God's kingdom all day, fell asleep on the boat during the night to deal with the crisis of a storm at sea and as he and his followers disembarked from the boat, Jesus is instantly met by the man with a myriad of demons. This is a spiritually conflicted meeting. Similar to the man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue in Capernaum (Mark 1:21-28), this man shouts out Jesus' identity and pleads to not be tormented as he bows down before him (5:7). Jesus responds by speaking to the demons and asks their name to gain power over them and he commands them to leave this man.

Pigs are an unclean animal to Jews like Jesus and his disciples. The man who had the demons was a gentile (non-Jew) who lived in the region of the Decapolis, which means the ten cities of this region which had a greater gentile population on the East side of the Sea of Galilee (you can read more about the Decapolis in the Week 8 study). This man was a new creation when he was freed from his demons. He was so excited by what Jesus did for him that he wanted to join Jesus' team. Despite his pleading, Jesus told him to go home and tell others what the Lord had done for him. This is exactly what he did. He proclaimed Jesus in the Decapolis.

Soul Sower

I recently visited Gavin Christopherson at the Winnebago County jail. He was interviewed by WREX Channel 13 Rockford, Illinois news at 10:00 p.m. on Easter night (See: <http://www.wrex.com/category/133164/video-landing-page?clipId=13254818&autostart=true>). Having known Gavin for about a year and a half, I saw a different man on April 10, 2017. While Gavin said that he has always had faith in God, I pressed him and asked what happened to cause him to be the strong man of faith I saw in front of me? Gavin said that when he was arrested this time he was on heroin and methadone, a drug prescribed by a physician to help him get off heroin. The dual withdrawal in jail (cold turkey) caused him to have a couple of seizures in his cell at which time he was transported to the hospital where he had more than ten seizures. Gavin said, "At one point I flat lined for nine seconds and I was brought back with the help of paddles. It was my near death experience, together with the power of God that turned my life upside down."

Gavin graduated fifth in his high school class at Harlem High School. He received a scholarship to the University of Illinois and was a Pre-Med major. The future looked bright for this charming and smart young man. In speaking with Gavin in jail, it is his desire now to help any young person steer away from or get help to get off of drugs. So what happened in Gavin's story to move from pursuing a career in medicine to an addict?

No one can ever say that Gavin is not motivated and a hard worker. Gavin had a 4.75 GPA and started a job

at age 15. Together with some of his co-workers they began to drink alcohol during breaks for the fun of it. Next came smoking pot with some friends and then doing coke and ecstasy with a family member. By the summer after his high school graduation, Gavin was doing cocaine every day and ecstasy on the weekends. Because sleep became difficult, he tried heroin just once – but then liked it.

Freshman year at U of I was a rollercoaster ride. Gavin at first did quite well with his classes despite using. As the year dragged on however, his grades hit the rocks because he overslept classes. He transferred to Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois and his addictions followed him to his condo. In 2008, he had a bad arrest for burglary and forgery. Gavin was bonded out and went into detox.

In 2010 he was again arrested this time for having a "controlled substance." Gavin completed a 37 day inpatient program. He was clean for over a year (2010-2011) when he started using again. In September 2012, Gavin was charged a second time for possession and bailed out. So began the road of injecting heroin. He was in and out of treatment over the next couple of years. Jail time hit at the start of 2014 for a month and a half. It was back to treatment, half-way houses to finish out 2014. In 2015, Gavin spent six months in prison as the addictive lifestyle continue to unravel.

Upon Gavin's release from prison, he was clean for the next eighteen months. In May of 2016 he got married and moved to Chicago where he worked long and hard hours while his wife went to school. Old

addictions look for the right time to make their return. By July 2016, heroin came back into the picture. After a few arrests, Gavin finds himself back in jail since his arrest on March 1, 2017. While it is unclear where Gavin is going to finish his time, what has become clear is the fact that he is a new man in Christ Jesus.

Faith was a spotty thing at best for Gavin before this near death experience. Prayer was his go to anytime he ran into trouble. Once he got out of trouble however, it was back to the old routine. Gavin decided to read the whole Bible when he was in prison. "The difference between then and now," Gavin explained, "is that when I first read it I read it much like history or literature. Now when I read, it comes alive and it speaks right to me," he added. Gavin's life has done a 180 degree turn. He is not only soaking up the faith, he is talking about it with others in jail. Gavin has become a force for God in the jail. It reminds me of the story of the Apostle Paul who did jail time and witnessed to the Lord as well. God is able to give new life to anyone who is open to be changed. Gavin praises God for the new man he has become in Christ!

Discussion Questions

- If you were a part of this story, where do you see yourself?
- When the people of the village came out to see the man Jesus had freed from demons, it says they were afraid. They begged Jesus to leave them. Why?

- How do you think this man who had a reputation fit as he went back to his community? Why do you think Jesus did not allow him to join his disciples?
- What do you take away from this story?

Notes

Week 3: READ: Mark 5:21-43

Show Time

Jesus and the disciples cross the sea one more time in chapters 4-5. The exact location along the shore of the Sea of Galilee is not given. They departed from the gentile dominated southeast side and were met immediately by a Jewish leader as they went ashore.

This is a rare occurrence in the gospel where a synagogue leader is shown in a positive light in relation to Jesus.

Jairus fell at Jesus feet, a position of intercession. He was desperate. Jairus urgently repeated his request to have Jesus accompany him to his home so he could lay his hands and heal his daughter. She was at the point of death. God hears our prayers. Things change in the presence of God. Things change when we pray. At the very least, we change when we open ourselves to God in prayer. Even if the girl had died before Jesus and Jairus got to his home (and maybe she did but Jesus did say she was still only asleep) and she remained dead, Jairus would have changed because of his encounter with Jesus. God encourages us to pray but we are not responsible for the outcome from our prayer requests unless we are called to take action on our request. All this is to say that when we pray we empower God to action as only God determines.

We also learn in this story and others like the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1ff) that our words and our will coupled with persistence in prayer is how Jesus teaches us to pray. This teaching has been lost on many in the United States where independence is valued and asking for help is often looked down upon. Add to that, among middle to upper middle class and wealthier people, where basic needs have often been met, there is less need and opportunity to practice urgent and heartfelt prayer. It is as we longingly looking to God for guidance and help that our eyes are open and we see what God is doing.

In typical Mark fashion, another story is interjected in the middle of the narrative. The stories are linked together in several ways. First of all, they are both healing stories. Secondly, they both involve the number twelve: the girl was twelve years old and the woman with the hemorrhage had been bleeding for twelve years. Finally, Jesus was the last ditch solution for both: Jairus' daughter was dying and the woman with the flow of blood had spent all of her money on doctors and had nowhere else to turn for help.

The woman made no request of Jesus. She had the faith to touch his garment and be healed. Her will and her action was her prayer. Jesus felt the power go out from him. There is power in healing. There was a crowd – so how could Jesus know about the woman and the healing when he was likely touched by many in the crowd? It can only be explained as a release of the power to heal. "Your faith has made you well," Jesus said. Her disease was healed. Jesus connects the faith of the individual and the power of God to bring about healing in this story. This is true in the story of Jairus as well. Jesus tells him to ignore the words that have come from his household that it's too late for his daughter to be healed, but rather, Jesus says, "Do not fear, only believe," (5:36).

Let me say it another way: both Jairus and the woman with an issue of blood had their eye on Jesus. He was their hope for healing. They put their trust in him. Jesus evoked faith in them. When Jesus says that their faith healed them he referred to their faith in him. While it is God who heals and not our faith, it requires faith in Jesus' ability to heal in order for the healing to

happen. This is further exemplified when Jesus instructs Jairus to push his fear away and trust him as they journey to the house together.

Nay-sayers come in all shapes and sizes. It only takes a few nay-sayers to steal our hope for healing, our vision for the future, or our dream about how God is calling me or may use me to make a difference in this world. "Who you?" they say. "Who do you think you are," they say as nay-sayers slash our dream to pieces. It takes focus and imagination to see and dream what God has in mind for us. Ephesians 3:20 say: *Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than you can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.* The same Holy Spirit that empowered the church on Pentecost to prophesy, dream and envision (Acts 2:17) is at work in you and me.

Like Jesus, we must put the nay-sayers out of our line of vision. Jesus was not rude but courageous when he put them out of the house. He did this to create an open and receptive climate for healing. He put all the mourners and all the negativity outside. Instead he brought the parents and his three closest disciples with him as witnesses of what faith in the power of God can do. Speaking to the girl in Aramaic, her native language, he told her to get up as he took her by the hand. Her health was restored.

In the Western world we are so reliant on our five senses to guide our life and we have underdeveloped our intuition and our faith in God. As a result, many of us have trouble seeing what God is doing in our life

and in our world. When we allow nay-sayers to influence us, it further inhibits our weaker senses of faith and intuition to develop. Many dreams have been stolen by a negative word someone said or did to you. It takes courage to remove this negative influence when they are your best friend, your boss or maybe your spouse. Let us dare to learn from Jesus' example who himself needed to remove distraction so he could focus on the healing that lay before him.

Soul Sower

When it comes to your body and health, prevention and attention are two important words. Prevention has everything to do with avoiding unhealthy habits like smoking and establishing healthy habits of eating good and nutritious food, regular exercise and getting adequate sleep. Paying attention to your body and how it works and feels can identify a problem before it becomes too significant.

Over fifteen years ago, Gloria noticed a lump in her breast. While she immediately called and got a doctor's appointment several weeks away she expected it would turn out to be nothing but it is always better to error on the side of caution than hide your head in the sand. Her nurse practitioner affirmed that she was young and 97% of the time it is nothing but it is better to get an ultrasound. When the results come back the medical staff decided it best to take a needle biopsy because there was something there.

Gloria's family history was on her side because the only person in her family tree with cancer was her mom's aunt. Life was full for Gloria who had just

turned forty. Together with her husband, they were doing life and raising her son. Then it happened. The next day OSF cancer care center called and said to come in and then broke the news using that bad "C" word: "I want you to know, it is cancer." Like a fast moving thunderstorm, Gloria said, "I burst into tears for thirty seconds, then I wiped away the tears and said, 'now what?'"

This strategic response to the problem is not all that surprising when you consider that Gloria's dad was a high school coach for a number of sports. Like a point guard on the basketball team stepping into the huddle after the coach called a time out, Gloria looked to the doctor to take the clip board and draw up a play and get back in the game. First, the doctor told her the brutal fact that she had invasive ductile carcinoma. Next, the doctor detailed an action plan and scheduled a lumpectomy three weeks later. Not every play a coach draws up goes exactly as planned. Gloria went home and said, "I swelled up like an alien!" It was back to surgery.

With clean margins and having her lymph nodes removed on one side, it was decision time about treatment. Knowing that reoccurrence is toxic, Gloria asked the doctor for his advice on treatment. She asked point blank, "What would you tell your wife to do if she was in my shoes?" As a result, Gloria underwent six weeks of radiation and six rounds of chemotherapy followed by seven years of drug therapy.

When a coach like Gloria's dad works the team hard in practice, going over both offensive and defensive

plays, occasionally players break team rules and make poor choices. One player's choice can make the whole team suffer. In the midst of Gloria's treatments and the fight of her life, her husband found the road too challenging for him and left the marriage. It is next to impossible for anyone to face a major illness alone. Thankfully, Gloria drew upon her support system at Lutheran Schools and at Grace Church. She received the support, prayers and encouragement she needed. Her bills were met and insurance coverage was a wonderful blessing.

Gloria recognizes that she is blessed and that many people do not survive cancer. Why has Gloria survived and others have died? No one knows. What is clear is that every day is a gift. When asked what she has learned through her cancer, she said this:

1. "My battle with cancer taught me to be in the moment and not thinking about what is next. It can change in an instant. Do what you need to do now."
2. "I never turn down prayer. I could feel the prayers of the people. I sensed their prayers and it gave me strength."
3. "I tried to never let my head space get negative. I worked hard at keeping my mental, physical and emotions fixed on the positive."
4. "Stephen gave me a focus beyond myself because I knew I wanted to be there for him. I prayed for the strength to go through this but I did not ask for this to be taken from me."

Finally, Gloria said, "You just never know in life what is coming next." She believes that her life has been changed for good as a result of her cancer. As a result, Gloria makes herself available for cancer patients and their families. It is God who heals but Gloria offers prayers, support and encouragement where she is able. "It is easy to lose hope in God if your outcome is negative," Gloria added. Yet we need God's comfort in death as much as we seek God's healing while dealing with a disease like cancer.

Discussion Questions

- What new discovery came to you as you read this story?
- Have you experienced the power of negativity to smother your dream? If so, what did you do or will you do about it?
- How would you describe a nay-sayer? What impact have you seen them have on others? Has there been a time where someone may have described you as a nay-sayer? What might be a better way to raise a concern without stealing a dream?
- Like Gloria, people who are ill do not need sympathy but support. What do you see to be the difference? What do you think about the teaching of Jesus to speak the word, engage

your will and persistent with your heart in your prayers?

Notes

Week 4: READ: Mark 6:1-13

Show Time

Jesus returns to his hometown, though unnamed in Mark, identified as Nazareth in Luke and Matthew. It was a small out of the way village of about 400 people in Jesus' day located twelve miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee. It was nothing compared to the Greek styled capital of Herod Antipas called Sepphoris, in whose shadow Nazareth existed. It was in his hometown where Jesus was known as well as his siblings and his mother. There is no mention of Joseph who may likely have been older when he married Mary. He may have died before Jesus was baptized.

While there were migrations of people throughout biblical times because of natural disasters, draught, and war, people often lived in the community in which they grew up. Many of the Nazarenes were offended by this son of a carpenter. In small villages like Nazareth, Jesus and his family would be well known by their neighbors. People lived side by side, worked and relied on each other and went to the synagogue to pray together. "Who does this son of a carpenter think he is anyway," his neighbors asked.

Apparently the hometown climate could not see past Jesus as one of the young men of the village. As a result, Jesus' power to heal was limited. While it is God who releases the power to heal, faith that God can and will heal creates a climate of expectation and openness to healing. On the other hand, when we are skeptical or closed to the idea of healing, it creates a climate resistant to healing. Strong unbelief builds a wall that may prevent God from healing. There is a connection between the ability of Jesus to do acts of God-given power and the faith and receptivity (openness) of the people.

An Episcopal priest's wife, Agnes Sanford, had a significant healing ministry in the twentieth century. To explain the connection in healing between the power of God and the faith of the person who needs healing, she used the image of electricity. Even if you have all the power you need and have properly wired your house, your lightbulb will not light up until you flip the switch. God has all the power to heal but until we flip the switch and are receptive to God's healing,

the power cannot flow through our house to illuminate the lightbulb.

Creation is composed of energy (heat, light, motion, chemical), because God who created the cosmos is the source of energy. Earth is filled with energy in various forms from its core to its crust and on its surface. Our bodies are charged with energy as we consume and digest food and its impact on releasing energy within us. When we become ill, our energy is diverted to attack the virus, the bacteria or cancer. This war in our body can spike a temperature or cause us to feel sluggish as the battle rages.

There is an energy charge that happens when a person who prays for another has permission to touch their head or hand. As the one receiving prayer breathes slowly, listens to the prayer openly, and is receptive, their blood pressures drop, relaxation sets in and God releases healing power throughout. God has the power to heal. Our faith that God can heal and our openness to that healing gives God access to do whatever God chooses to do in response to our prayer. Few people in Nazareth were that open to the little Jesus they had seen grow up in their village. God forces no one to be healed!

Jesus refers to himself as a prophet. Adela Yarbro Collins, in *Mark, a Commentary*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, pp. 46-47 has identified many similarities between Jesus and the prophets of Elijah and Elisha. Like many of the classical prophets including John the Baptist, Jesus called for people to repent and believe (1:15). Jesus was endowed with the Holy Spirit at his baptism (1:10-11). Elisha asked for a double portion of

the spirit from Elijah during the transition from one prophet to the next (2 Kings 2:9, 15). The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness (1:12) as the spirit moved prophets from place to place (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16). God provided for Jesus and Elijah during a forty day retreat (Mark 1:13; 1 Kings 19:4-8). The healing of the leper by Jesus (1:40-45) has parallels to Naaman's healing by Elisha (2 Kings 5). Jesus raising of Jairus' daughter (5:22-43) has similarities to the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:17-24) and the son of the Shunammite by Elisha (2 Kings 4:8-37). Jesus did much of what a prophet does.

Jesus taught in many villages. He sent out the disciples two by two and gave them authority – his authority over unclean spirits. They were taught to trust the people of hospitality to provide for them in every village. Because they were to trust God to open doors of provision, the disciples were to take no food, no money and no extra stuff. Like Jesus had done before them as they learned by watching him, they called people to repentance. As Jesus had done in their presence, they cast out demons and healed the sick.

The authority resides in the name of Jesus, who is the Christ (Greek title for Messiah). The casting out of demons or of evil is a power ministry. The disciples were given the power because of the authority of Jesus who sent them. In the name of Jesus, the disciples could use force to drive out evil in a person possessed. After sharing the new life found in Christ Jesus, the early church evangelists could lay hands and pray for the Holy Spirit to fill the void left by the

vacated evil. This is truly a changing of teams and sources of power.

Soul Sower

Back a generation ago, to be a missionary meant going to another country to work for good and to tell them about Jesus. For those of us who stayed home, it meant that at least once a year we prayed for them and had a special offering to financially support them. Things have changed. Our missionaries have been busy for years equipping their indigenous replacements. Countries like Ethiopia and Tanzania have developed their own seminaries and have called most of the professors from within their own church today. The pastors, teachers, evangelists and music leaders are all local. In fact, many U.S. denominations like the Roman Catholic Church, where pastors and priests are in shortage, are now bringing pastors, priests and professors in from the Philippines, Peru, and Kenya to pastor U.S. churches.

In this new day in the United States, we recognize that there is a growing need for the story of Jesus to be retold among our neighbors, many of whom no longer know nor follow him. As a result of this reality, Ron and John; and Debbie and Judy began to meet and build relationships with our neighbors on River Park. On many Saturday mornings, these four individuals spent ninety-minutes to two hours visiting neighbors who opened their doors and some, in time, even opened their lives to these four people. Relationships were established and lives were changed as well as the neighborhood. A few people

have ventured into worship and the community called Grace as a result of these visits.

While these visits have curtailed over the last couple of years its impact has been sustained. It is possible to see the visible fruit of this action: the sense of community was strengthened on River Park, many casual conversations took place yet every once in a while a special connection was made. These are the silver dollar conversations among the many scattered penny chats. It is these special moments that kept this foursome going on sunny, rainy and snow-covered days. Add to that the comradeship of the two-some and you have the makings of a meaningful start to the weekend. Ron shared with me, "There was just something special about the routine and the people I met that kept me going. It actually made my weekend complete whenever we went out," he added. They all admitted it was unlike anything else they had ever done before.

In the last couple of years, the invitation and encouragement to build relationships in your own neighborhood has widened the vision beyond the home-base Grace neighborhood. The challenge of this wider and more general encouragement to meet and establish relationships with your own neighbors is that it is almost impossible to measure. Our hunch is that some people are talking to their neighbors on occasion. We have evidence of some fruit from these relationships which we celebrate.

To support the people of Grace in reaching out to their neighbors, a new venture was added in Advent 2016. A blue votive candle and a prayer for the

neighborhood was made available for anyone who would put the candle in their front window at night and pray the prayer several times a week. The idea was two-fold: if we get people thinking about and praying for their neighbors, they will be more likely to reach out to their neighbors. Secondly, if neighbors notice the candle in the window, maybe they might ask "what does this mean?"

I had this idea several years before but it did not seem to be the right time. As this past Advent drew near, it felt like this could be the moment. In my wildest dreams, I had hoped that perhaps twenty-five households would sign up across our region and serve as little lighthouses in our community. Blue was chosen for the votive because it is the color of hope. I was more than pleasantly shocked to discover that over 125 people had signed up to pray for their neighborhood. To keep this prayer and awareness of our neighbors alive, it is a prayer we offer in worship every week. It takes consistency to build momentum as we pray and concretely demonstrate the love Jesus has for every neighbor in the world.

What Ron, John, Debbie and Judy started over nine years ago on River Park is not just a thing of the past. We are looking for some new variations of this local work around the church. The street by street approach remains the most thorough way to meet our neighbors and create genuine caring relationships. This is all done for good and for God. On the good side, when neighbors know and watch out for each other, the neighborhood has grown stronger and safer. This is the basic function of being a good

neighbor. This is a key part of our Christian calling – to be good neighbors (look at the 10 Commandments). Reminiscing about how our neighborhoods used to be gets us nowhere. It takes work to get to know your neighbors.

On the God side of the equation, when we show the love of Jesus, receptive, spiritually open and hungry people will be curious. We are watched. Do we really care? Is this a bait and switch where all we care about is getting people to come to Grace? That is not true love or care. Because we do genuinely love and care for God's people, that is real. It is because we are real, people will want to know the one who loves the world.

Jesus was tested by a lawyer who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. The answer given was the Great Commandment: to love God with your whole being and to love your neighbor (Luke 10:25-28). The question that burns in my heart is this: how can we love our neighbor if we do not know who they are? This is a critical question because eternal life was staked around this action. Part of loving our neighbor is the hope that they may come to love, worship and follow the Lord with their whole being. It is love that can transform our relationships, our neighborhoods, church, school, workplace and world. It begins with you and me. Are you in?

Discussion Questions

- What is it about Jesus and your faith in him that you most appreciate?

- How could faith in Jesus be helpful to some of your family, friends and neighbors?
- Jesus sent the twelve and he sends you and me wherever we are to be his witnesses. It is a matter of authentic living as well as sharing words of life and hope in Christ. Who is God sending you to be a witness?
- What if anything do you need to be a stronger witness?

Notes

Week 5: READ: Mark 6:14-29

Show Time

John the baptizer was in the line of the great Jewish prophets of the Old Testament. As Mark 1 tells us, God sent John to get people ready for the coming of the LORD. He was like a herald in the Roman Empire who came to announce the coming of the king. John came from the wilderness to the banks of the River Jordan calling for the Jews to turn their life around and back toward God. This action of spiritual turning is called "repentance."

What John offered to any who repented and wanted to begin a new life with God was a washing of

repentance in the Jordan. The time was ripe for a rather eccentric personality like John for it had been almost 100 years since the Romans had occupied Israel. John's appearance was unique as one dressed out in a camel costume and eating a diet of roasted locusts and honey. He lived simply. He ate whatever he could find and as a result John owed no one anything. John was debt free. The Jews saw and experienced a man of faith who lived like a rebel in the face of the oppressive Romans.

Many of the Jews were captivated by what they heard about this wild man at the Jordan River. What started as a curiosity soon turned into a movement. Curious people came to see John only to find that he somehow touched their lives and they too wanted to turn their life back to God. Jesus came to John to be baptized by him. Jesus' baptism was like no other. The Spirit of God descended like a dove and a voice from heaven claimed Jesus as the beloved son of God.

The narrative in Mark turns from John, at this point forward, to Jesus. The last word given about John is in Mark 1:14 which says that he was arrested. What did John do to cause him to be arrested? The gospel gives no evidence at this point. John fulfills his role to prepare the way for Jesus and after Jesus' baptism, John is removed from the scene by his arrest. This holds true until Mark 6.

What we learn in Mark 6 is that John was arrested because he had a moral compass and he challenged the provincial leader, King Herod. It could be argued that John was not very politically savvy in poking at

King Herod. If you happen to know anything about Jewish prophets, being soft spoken or politically correct was never their calling. Earlier, John had called Herod out for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. As an aside, history tells us that Herodias was not Herod's brother Philip's wife (6:17) but rather Herod's half-brother Herod II's wife. John's words of judgement stung Herodias and she begged her new husband Herod Antipas to have John arrested. The irony in the story is that Herod Antipas had a deep respect and enjoyed listening to the wisdom and challenges uttered by this holy man.

It was during the birthday of Herod that Herodias found the opportunity to have John killed once and for all. Her daughter came to the party and danced for the guests. This so pleased Herod that he asked the girl what she might like in return? Her mother bent her ear and she asked for the head of John on a silver platter. The plotting and trickery worked. Herodias received John's head.

This whole section (6:17-29) was a flash back triggered by 6:14-16. This is the first time that Herod is mentioned in Mark's gospel. Similar to 1:28, the fame of Jesus continued to spread. In this instance, the fame was tied to the work of the disciples who had been sent out by Jesus throughout the region to continue the work he had been doing of casting out demons and healing many who were sick (6:13). The flashback pertains to a rumor that identified Jesus with John: *Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him"...* But when Herod heard of

it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised" (6:14, 16). This statement sets up the narrative that follows relating the story of John's beheading.

Soul Sower

John Mark, the cousin of the evangelist of the early church named Barnabas, an early companion of the Apostle Paul, is named as the evangelist who brought the gospel to Egypt somewhere in years 42-50 C.E. The historic church in Egypt is called the Coptic Church, Coptic meaning "Egyptian." Mark the evangelist is the first Patriarch or Bishop of the Apostolic See of Alexandria in Egypt.

The story of the Coptic Church is a powerful witness to the gospel in the midst of a long history of martyrdom. The pairing of the beheading of John the baptizer with the Coptic Church is fitting because of the recent killings and even beheadings of Coptic Christians. As an ancient church, Copts know the story of how Christianity from its beginnings suffered persecution and martyrdom for refusing to denounce Jesus as Lord. In fact, the Coptic Church boldly tells that the blood of the martyrs is greater than preaching or teaching. The word in Greek for witness and martyr come from the same root.

Like all Christians, the Coptic Church looks to the cross of Christ as the symbol of life, hope and victory. In the cross is demonstrated the sacrificial love of God in Christ. In Christ and his suffering and death, a church that has a long history of suffering finds mystic sweet communion. As a result of the roots of many of the ancient churches based on the blood of Christ and

the early martyrs of the faith like Stephen (Acts 7:54-60), James, the disciple (Acts 12:1-2), and from Christian tradition, Peter and Paul (about 64 CE), churches like the Coptic Church find affirmation for their suffering that God is not only with them but their suffering is a blessing.

The following Scriptures are found on the Web site for the Coptic Church:

- "It is the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us,"
Romans 8:16-18.
- "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in death,"
Philippians 3:10.
- "Now you have observed my...persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,"
2 Timothy 3:10a, 11-12.
- "For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not

at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal," 2 Corinthians 4:17-18.

The story of persecution and suffering among the Copts began with the Romans, the Byzantines, the Ottomans, more recently, ISIS and other radical groups. Here is a brief overview of recent suffering: in July 2013, Muslim Brotherhood supporters burned dozens of churches. In February 2015, 21 Coptic migrant workers were beheaded on a Mediterranean beach in Libya by ISIS. In December 2016, the Botroseya Church bombing killed 29 and injured 47 others. On Palm Sunday 2017, two bombings of Coptic Churches (St. George's in Tanta region and St. Mark's in Alexandria) resulted in the death of 45 people and injuring over 130 more.

The power of the cross in winning the victory over sin and death becomes a powerful source of hope and confidence in eternal life when death may strike at any time especially in and near the church. The metal of faith among the Copts is tested every day. Because they are fully aware of their mortality and weakness, they lean on the strength of God. When the threat of death is in your face, eternal life becomes ever central in faith. *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God,* 1 Corinthians 1:18.

Discussion Questions

- What grabbed your attention in today's readings?
- What question or new thought do you want to explore more fully?
- What encouragement do you find for your witness to Jesus with others?
- How is God calling you to respond?

Notes

Week 6: READ: Mark 6:30-56

Show Time

Do you remember a time when you did something on a "shoestring?" For those of you too young to be familiar with this saying, it refers to having fun or doing a project around your home for just a few dollars. It is quite amazing how far a couple hundred dollars can get you if you are willing to borrow what you do not have, like a sleeping bag and tent, email a few extended family members or friends to couch-surf for a night along the way, and if you have a cook stove and eat low down on the food chain. Some of our

family's most memorable vacations are those when we went on the cheap, involved the kids in the thrifty adventure and just made the most of our time together.

The twelve returned from their mission but there is no record of what they experienced in the field as they went from village to village. Instead, Jesus tells them it is time to retreat, rest and refocus. They again return to a boat to find a deserted place along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Unfortunately for them, people were so eager to listen and receive healing or to have demons cast out that they anticipated where this boat was headed and beat them there on foot. The fact that they landed on the shore of a remote location indicates that the gathered crowds had nowhere to buy food.

While the twelve suggest inhospitable solutions like sending the crowds away to go and seek out their own food, Jesus sees the crowd as a shepherd views his own sheep fold. A shepherd always watches out for the needs of his sheep like looking for green pastures and still waters where the sheep can find water. Jesus puts the demand to meet the need back on his team. After considering how much bread they would need to purchase to feed the crowd, they look to their own resources: five loaves of bread and a couple of fish.

Among Jesus and his twelve, five loaves of bread and two fish may be enough to at least satisfy them for a while. It would certainly not be a filling meal but ample to alleviate hunger. But among 5000 men? Here is another example how Jesus was like the great

prophets of the Old Testament. The prophet Elisha urged a man who had twenty barley loaves and fresh grain to set it before one hundred hungry people in a land marred by famine. The food was far from sufficient to meet the needs of the people. In a prophetic utterance, the man of God said "Thus says the Lord," give them the food. Like the feeding of the 5000, there were leftovers (2 Kings 4:42-44).

A widow with two children came to the prophet Elisha because creditors were coming to take her children as slaves because of her debt. Elisha asked what she had in her house and all she had was a jar of oil. She was instructed by the man of God to go into the house and start pouring the oil into empty vessels. As she poured the oil kept coming until all her empty vessels were filled with oil. Elisha told her to go and sell this oil and pay off her debt and she and her children could live on the remainder (2 Kings 4:1-7).

After the prophet Elijah had a confrontation with the evil king Ahab who took Jezebel to be his wife, Elijah predicted a drought. What made Ahab so evil in the sight of the Lord was that he worship all types of pagan gods. What follows during the drought are two stories about how God provided for Elijah. In the first story, Elijah was instructed by God to go to the river bed called Cherith, east of the Jordan. He drank from the river and ate in the morning and evening the meat and bread brought to him by a raven (1 Kings 17:3-7). Eventually, the drought dried up the river bed and he needed to relocate.

Next, the Lord told Elijah to go to a village called Zarephath in Phoenicia, near the Mediterranean Sea.

God sent him to stay with a widow who he met at the gate of the city gathering wood for one last meal for herself and her son because she only had a little oil and meal left to make bread. Then she and her child would simply die. Elijah told her to make him a little cake first and bring it to him to eat, then do likewise for herself and her son. Until the day that the Lord sent rain, God provided enough oil and meal so that they never went hungry (1 Kings 17:8-16).

One of the key principles of mission is that God has given us all the resources we need to accomplish God's work. Sometimes we have the resources ourselves but more oftentimes, we need to look and discover all the resources that surround us. Elijah discovered that God could provide through a widow in a gentile country. They never got rich but they always had enough for today. Jesus taught his followers to pray: Give us THIS DAY our daily bread. All we need is enough for today.

God provides all we need for today. The resources we need may be the people of the church, the church building and property, it could be our neighbors, the neighboring school, other churches, community leaders, businesses and industries, and other civic organizations. Let us dare to look beyond ourselves and see the bigger picture of what God wants to accomplish to bless this community and the people in it. It takes relationships, faith to see possibilities and the willingness to look outside the box.

A closing thought on Jesus walking on the water (6:45-52) and additional healings (6:53-56). After the big miracle of feeding 5000 people, Jesus sent his

disciples on their way by boat. He walked up into the hills around the Sea and sat down to pray. Retreat, renewal and rest are an important part of recharging your battery before the next situation. Jesus modeled that for us.

It is interesting to note that Jesus was planning to walk past the disciples in the boat and get to the other side (v. 48). Similar to the storm on the sea in chapter 4, they are afraid and he calms the storm. Honestly, I do not find much personal application for my life in Jesus walking on the Sea. What ties this story to the feeding of the 5000 is the left over loaves mentioned in 6:44 and 6:52. The disciples, like the path in the parable of the sower, had hard hearts (5:52; 8:17).

In 5:53-56, we have Mark's summary of the crowd rushing to Jesus as they get ashore to have him heal the sick. This continued as Jesus and the twelve went from village to village and even to farms (v. 56) for more healing.

Soul Sower

Is there a difference today between wants and needs? It has become very confusing today because of our rapidly changing world. Technology and social media is dramatically changing our lifestyles, communication patterns and the speed of information. Are cell phones a want or a need? Better yet, with pay phones and land lines vanishing, it may make cell phones a need but how about smart phones? Do we need to have instant access to the internet all the time, everywhere? Are selfies and videos of everything we see needing to be recorded? Video

cell phones are capturing so much of what is going on in our world that they become a mini-news outlet. Are they a want or a need?

While smart phones are not on the lowest rung of Maslow's hierarchy of needs which includes food, shelter, water, and clothing, it could be argued that it is on the second rung which has to do with safety. Whether it is the pings on a cell tower that prove useful to a homicide investigator or the instant access to call 911, cell phones provide some security.

In this new day of communication on social media, a smart phone is an important way of networking and relating with people. This qualifies as the third rung which is love and belonging. This implies connecting and relating with people which is the very thing smart phones do quickly and quite well. Texting, tweeting and Facetime will never replace face-to-face communication, yet it serves a good purpose. Perhaps after all, on some level, smart phones are a basic human need.

This has everything to do with the idea that God provides. In Hebrew, God provides is *Yahweh Yireh* (in the KJV it is *Jehovah Jireh*). The concept of the provision of God is seen in Genesis 22:14 where Abraham has taken his son in obedience to God to Mount Moriah (the same location later identified as Mount Zion in Jerusalem) where he was going to sacrifice his only son Isaac to God. Abraham said the Lord will provide – and provide God did – a lamb in the thicket for sacrifice.

The story of the feeding of the 5000 is a story of God providing food for the hungry. Jesus took the few loaves and fish and it multiplied to meet the need. Many of the soul sowers I think of are women. There is Martha in the gospels who gets a bad rap because she was all about creating a meal to feed her friend and guest, Jesus. Who said Martha could not multitask by both preparing a meal and listening to Jesus teach? Jesus also had a group of women who provided for him and his disciples out of their finances so that they could eat and have strength to do ministry (Luke 8:1-3). There was Lydia in Philippi, Macedonia who provided for Paul and Timothy out of her means while they were in Philippi preaching and teaching about Jesus (Acts 16:11-15). She ran her own business and became perhaps the first Christian in her village. She and her household were baptized. She opened her home to them to eat and sleep while they were there.

There are many examples of soul sowers in the Old Testament as well. Rahab the prostitute, who is another business woman, who opened up her home in the walled city of Jericho to the two Jewish spies (Joshua 2:1). When the king came looking for them, she hid them at her own risk. Later, she helped them escape over the wall to safety (Joshua 2:6-16). Rahab went above and beyond in helping these men in God's name be safe.

Another example is Ruth, the daughter-in-law of a Naomi, a Jewish woman. Both Rahab and Ruth were gentiles who helped by providing what they could to Jews. Ruth accompanied Naomi back to her home

country and village called Bethlehem. Ruth risked herself in a foreign country to go and harvest grain along the edges of the fields to provide food for Naomi and herself.

What is of further interest in the lives of these two gentile women is that they are listed in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Rahab becomes the mother-in-law of Ruth when she remarries Boaz, Rahab's son. In addition, Ruth's grandson is David the King of Israel and he is Rahab's great-grandson. Jesus comes from a family of great courage and generosity. These characteristics are not lost on Jesus either.

Discussion Questions

- Who comes to mind when you think of an example of providing for the needs of other people – not just your own family? This is a person of generosity.
- How did this person provide for others? What do you think motivated them to give beyond themselves?
- What would be an example of when you have seen God at work in providing for you or your family?
- How might you respond to today's lesson?

Notes

Week 7: READ: Mark 7:1-23

Show Time

As the next act begins, the mood has changed from the frenzy of the crowds wanting to touch Jesus as well as the throngs of people hauling their sick on mats so he could touch and heal them. This scene opens up with the religious leaders plotting against Jesus. They are lurking in the shadows, following from a distance but always keeping their eyes peeled for an opportunity to catch Jesus and his disciples doing something wrong. The fact is that both sides loved God but they approached faith from two different perspectives. The religious leaders felt that the law was given by God to Moses and it was to be obeyed out of respect for God. If we do this, we will live in accordance with the will of God. Jesus operated out of a belief that God created all people to love and know God. His work was one of compassion and inclusion. As a result he reached out to many

who the religious community felt were living outside the law and outside of God.

The air is charged for more conflict. The pot stirred when the Pharisees catch some of the disciples eating without washing their hands. This is a code violation. It is time to challenge Jesus. The religious leaders challenged Jesus on what he is teaching his followers. Why are his followers ignoring the tradition of the elders and eating with unwashed hands?

In response, Jesus attacks the teaching of the religious leaders as he quotes the from prophet Isaiah chapter 29 which cuts to the core differentiating between matters of the heart which equates to authentic faith over and against vain worship. The prime focus of what Jesus is saying is directed at the vain worship of the Pharisees and scribes. It is they who have abandoned the law of Moses, in particular the fourth commandment to honor your parents. Because these religious leaders prefer to teach human precepts like the importance of washing hands before meals from the tradition of the elders, Jesus claims they are voiding the Word of God.

Jesus turns to the crowd and as he did when he was teaching the parables in Mark 4, he calls them to "Listen," (v. 14). This is the same word he used to begin and end the parable of the sower in 4:3, 9. This is a call to pay attention so that they may understand (7:14). Unlike the Pharisees who are so concerned about how things appear on the outside, Jesus makes it clear that what matters is what is going on in the inside.

For example, the concern of the Pharisees is like the car owner who spends all amount of time washing and waxing the outside of the car, removing spots on the seats and the floor mats and even rubbing the dash board so it smells like Corinthian leather. When they drive by, they are looking good. Jesus, on the other hand, would be the car owner who lifts the hood and properly maintains the engine, paying attention to all of the levels, belts and filters. While looking good may draw the attention of the crowd, it is running smoothly that keeps you going from place to place.

Typical of the teaching section in Mark 4, Jesus takes his disciples aside to further explain his teaching. Hidden away in v. 19 is the radical teaching of Jesus that all food is now clean and can be eaten – even pork. All the provisions of the Old Testament about dietary restrictions are removed in this statement. This is the message that Peter received as well when he was praying and a sheet came down from heaven announcing that all food is acceptable to God in Acts 10. This leads to a further inclusion in Acts 10:34 that says that all people, not just Jews, are part of God's mission and concern.

Jesus did not come for the sake of a religious show. What matters are the things of the heart, our attitude, character and consistent practice of the faith disciplines like prayer, meditation on God's Word, serving others and communal worship of God. All of this is driven by our relationship with God, gratitude for who we are blessed to be in Christ Jesus as well as the opportunity to be part of God mission in this world. It is not about us or being seen by others but rather

about God and being part of how God wants to bless this world.

Jesus came to change his followers from the inside out. He identifies that evil intent comes out of the heart. The list of evil is similar to the works of the flesh named by the Apostle Paul (Galatians 5:19-21). All of these works are self-centered. But rather we are to yield to the fruits of the Spirit (5:22-23). It comes about when we die to ourselves and rise anew trusting God in Christ. It all begins with me. When I die to murder, envy and slander, Christ raises me up to begin living in love, generosity, and truth. When I die to lust, fornication and adultery, Christ can raise me up to begin living in gratitude, encouragement and faithfulness. And when I die to pride, Christ can raise me up to begin living in humility which enables me to see that God loves all people and all people matter.

As this act comes to an end, Jesus' purpose to make our life in him real and not just lip service is paramount. This implies that when we pray, it is about our attitude in the presence of God rather than the words spoken. The same truth applies to worship. When our attitude is open and we are seeking God's presence, the form of worship is always less important than our hearts desire to unite with Christ in praise and thanksgiving.

Soul Sower

Jill is a follower of Jesus. When you meet her, it is written all over her in real ways. There is nothing fake about her. Jill's life is not perfect. She makes no bones about that. She has always been a servant

leader in the church. Her gifts are kindness, attentiveness, faith and hospitality.

The wheels of her marriage started coming off when her two kids were in high school. Jill and her husband at the time were both very active in their church. They spent much time and money in marriage counseling and individual therapy. This helped to hold their marriage together until their kids were both in college. Most outsiders had no clue that there were problems because they kept that behind the doors of their home.

It takes two people to make a relationship work or fail. Both people contribute to problems and work together to address them. It cannot be said that Jill and her first husband did not try to make this relationship work. However, unfaithfulness can only be forgiven for so long. When it continues, decisions need to be made. Finally, Jill said that she could not remain in this marriage any longer. Very quietly the marriage came to an end.

Through it all, Jill remained an anchor in the church. She had learned through the witness of her parents who were devoted Christians that while involvement in church is important, the real road of faith happens in the home where you pray and meditate on the Word together. It is in the home where you learn to forgive and love each other. It is in the home where you process the challenges of living Christian at work, or school or in the neighborhood. Jill had good role models in her parents. The seeds of faith they planted in Jill grew and bore much fruit.

Jill and her ex did a good job of practicing faith in the home despite their problems as evidence by the faith lived out in their daughter and son and their families. Jill moved about fifteen years ago to live near her daughter and family in part because her daughter, now in her forties, battled cancer for twenty years. She has helped with her grandkids while her daughter has been ill due to chemotherapy. The road of faith does not prevent us from facing problems. Rather it equips us for handling them with greater grace and the confidence of knowing that Christ is with us in the midst of it.

What comes out from the center of Jill's being is the character of Christ. If you needed someone to listen, Jill could do that well and offer prayer at its conclusion. As first time worshipers, you would see her genuine smile light up her face as she met you because she is actually glad to meet you.

What Jill is most famous for are her mouthwatering chocolate chip cookies that she generously shares with people. There are few things that taste so sweet than these just-out-of-the-oven cookies. Once you get on the list you may get a batch delivered to your home because you just had a baby, someone in your family just died, you are her neighbor, a co-worker, a first time worshiper. Jill single handedly has kept Nestle Tollhouse Chocolate Chips in business.

This is Jill. If you need prayer, she will follow though and you can feel her prayers. People who have gone through pain and had nowhere else to turn, learn how to pour out their prayes. Whether it was going

through marriage problems and divorce or fighting for her daughter's life in prayer, Jill values prayer.

The irony is that Jill is too humble to want to be acknowledged for her faith. Her response would be that she is nothing without her Lord. To God who loves all of us and the Lord Jesus Christ be all praise and honor and glory. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- Can you think of a time when you may have been going through the motions of faith without giving God much attention? If so, what may have caused you to find yourself more distant from God? What woke you up to the presence of God?
- We all wrestle with some works of the flesh that cling to us (See Galatians 5:19-21). What do you need to let go of and surrender to God?
- At the same time, God works to bear fruits of the Spirit within us. What fruit are you wanting more of in your life (See Galatians 5:22-23)?
- What did you find helpful in this study?

Notes

Week 8: READ: Mark 7:24-37

Show Time

There is an abrupt scene change as Jesus set course to leave Galilee and head to the gentile region of Phoenicia. This appears to be a solitary trip for Jesus and there is no indication that his disciples are anywhere to be seen. Why did Jesus up and leave Galilee and go to the ancient city of Tyre when there is only one story recorded about this trip? There are many questions that simply go unanswered. Perhaps this was the only story passed on orally but Jesus likely did other work in Tyre. At the very least, Matthew 15:21-28 also included this story in his gospel.

Tyre is located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea northwest of Galilee. It is a little over twenty-five miles from Capernaum. Based on other stories in Mark, the reason he ducks into a home is likely that a crowd has already gathered around him. Despite his desire to not be noticed, his fame, even in this gentile region, is too great. A gentile woman comes to Jesus and prostrates herself before him. It is a humble position to lie face down on the ground. Jairus took this same position when he met Jesus and begged for him to come and heal his daughter (Mark 5:22-23). Lying prostrate is the position of the intercessor, calling out to God on behalf of another person.

There is urgency for this woman on behalf of her possessed daughter. Urgency is a key to change both for individuals as well as organizations. It is a motivating factor and empowers change for people who by nature resist the unknown. Another word that would describe this is desperation. Any parent that has had to fight for the sake of their child's health knows what it means to do whatever it takes for the sake of their child. This was the situation in Tyre. From her prone position, I could imagine her reaching over and grabbing Jesus' ankle and not letting go until he responded to her.

Jesus did respond and said that he came for the children (of Israel) first. You cannot take their food and throw it to the dogs (v. 27). There are not many non-religious leaders who debate Jesus and even fewer who win the argument. "Even dogs deserve to be fed," she said. Jesus tells her to go home because her daughter is now free of her demon (v. 29).

We can learn something about prayer from this story. Jesus teaches that the most important thing is what flows out of our heart should be our prayer. When we have something pressing to pray for, grab a hold of the urgency of the matter and persist in prayer.

There is a geographical anomaly that happens as Jesus departs for home. He goes north about twenty-five miles to Sidon where there is no record of ministry in that city. From there he heads southeast to the Decapolis, the region of the ten cities. This is Jesus return trip to the Decapolis. This was the site of the exorcism of the man with a legion of demons (Mark 5:1-20).

When Jesus arrives in the Decapolis he is welcomed by the people who bring a deaf and mute man to him to heal. Now the Decapolis is a large geographical region of the Roman Empire (See Appendix 3). The northern most of the ten cities is Damascus in Syria which is about 75-80 miles from Philadelphia (modern day Amman, the capital of Jordan), the southernmost city in the Decapolis. From east to west, the width may be about 40-50 miles. It is fairly rural with lots of farmland and pastureland. Neither in Mark 5 nor Mark 7:31-37 is the exact location mentioned where Jesus ministered.

When Jesus left the Decapolis the first time, the people of the city who came to him after the 2000 pigs had drowned in the Sea, begged him to leave (5:17). In the story in Mark 7, they now beg Jesus to heal this man. What changed? Is it possible that the witness of the man who Jesus freed from his barrel-full of demons could have changed their minds in time? Remember that Jesus ignored his request to join his followers and go with them. Instead, Jesus told him to go home and tell everyone all that he had done for him (5:19). If so, consider what just one witness can do to impact not only a community but a region of the country? The power of one! Now after this healing, the power of two as well as all who wanted this man healed.

Jesus takes this man aside to a private place where there is a healing climate, just this man and Jesus. Next, Jesus communicates with the man in the only way he can and that is with touch. This is a very therapeutic model of healing. Jesus jabs his fingers

into the deaf man's ears. Then he spits and applies his saliva to the man's tongue. Jesus' saliva would be imbued with his divine power. In ancient times, saliva was commonly used for a variety of healings.

Then Jesus prayed. He looked up to heaven. He signed. In antiquity, the sigh sometimes signified the drawing in of spiritual power (ibid. p. 371). Breathe in the life-giving power of God. Breathe out any worry or distraction. This gives lots of oxygen to the brain so the focus for prayer can be sharpened. This can be a good reminder to take time and breathe and not rush our intercessory prayers for a person. The wisdom of being in private removed any anxiety that other people could bring to the prayer session. This man only had the eyes of Jesus on him! He could be more relaxed and thereby receptive.

Finally, Jesus says in Aramaic a command word for "be open." It's a firm word in the vocative voice. This is not a suggestion or hope but an expectation being called into being. Ears be open to hear. Tongue, be loosed to speak. Immediately...(v. 35). When the people saw the man could hear and speak, the word about Jesus began a movement in the Decapolis.

Soul Sower

I love Dave. I wish you could meet him but he lives far away. He is a combination of polar opposites. He is loud but yet listens well. He is bold but knows when to wait. He is very sincere but can break out laughing and fill a room with his roar on a dime. One thing for sure is that Dave is a man of God.

I met David at a different time in my life. We found each other as two people working for the Lord and on a course to learn more about prayer. The faith tribes we came from were not in any way similar. I came out of a pastor-led Lutheran church where prayer was written or scripted so we could read our responses. No one wanted to be put on the spot or embarrassed and pre-set prayers made us comfortable.

David may have had some Roman Catholic roots but the tradition he had claimed more recently was Pentecostal. I didn't know what to expect from him exactly as we explored our interest in learning more about prayer but I was curious what that might look like. I had gotten to be friends with him first so I was pretty confident that no matter what, I was going to be ok.

We agreed to get together over the lunch hour and pray at his church (just in case he got loud or did something weird in my book. It felt safer). The building his mission church rented was kitty-corner to the church building our mission church rented. This was convenient. At that first prayer time I was shocked to discover that he brought profound written prayers out of church history for us to mediate on. While I was bringing some spontaneous prayers for our city in the weeks ahead, he felt drawn to silence and mediation. There was more than once that I fell asleep in the silence of our prayer time.

In time, somewhere in the recesses of my heart, a still small voice began to whisper a word, a phrase or a thought. Sometimes these were prayers for our city. Sometimes they were unrelated. This prayer room in

this rented church building became for me a prayer womb. By that I mean, new ideas that gave me energy were being birthed in my heart. This year together in prayer launched me into a new direction for ministry. It involved leaving what I loved and moving to something brand new. David was a confirming force for me that what was happening was not just me, but God.

Jody and I went on a get-away during this past Lent. While sitting at the ocean I got an instant message on Facebook. It was David. Some eighteen years later, miles apart, we have had a couple of great conversations. Life and ministry has changed for both of us. Yet we share a common bond born out of the year spent together in God's presence in the prayer room in his rented church building. I learned more from David, I am sure, than he learned from me. It fills my heart with joy to be reconnected with him in some way and to recall the amazing ways God works to draw us into the presence of the Lord.

Discussion Questions

- What did you think about as you read over the two healing stories?
- Which story and why was it more interesting to you?
- Who has been a mentor to you in prayer? What have you learned from them?
- What is your most comfortable way to pray? What do you still want to learn more about in prayer?

Notes



Appendix 1

40 BC fishing boat found in the Sea of Galilee.

Appendix 2: Map of the Sea of Galilee

