

## THE HEALING TOUCH OF JESUS

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

### Mark 1:29-39

*As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Simon Peter's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. He took her by the hand and lifted her up. The fever left her; she got up and began to serve them. Later that evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door.*

\* \* \*

Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons and we can too even though we don't consider demons literal, real entities. We can heal the sick and cast out *demons* if we know what they are and what they aren't.

Thirty some years ago I was called on to deal with a botched exorcism.

The daughter of a certain mother was behaving badly, staying out past curfew, talking rudely to her mother, using profanity, drinking and maybe smoking "the devil's weed." You know, the usual teenage stuff.

But this particular mother was a self-identified, born again, charismatic Christian. She told her prayer group about her daughter and they began to pray mightily. The daughter's behavior worsened. So they—all by themselves—surmised that the girl must be possessed by a demon. They planned an intervention.

Late one night when the daughter came home, the prayer group—along with a maverick priest—was waiting. They forced the girl to the floor and—in the name of the Jesus—ordered the demon to come out. They went on and on and on and on while the girl screamed, struggling to get up and get free.

Well, something dramatic happened that night, but it wasn't what the group had counted on. The girl was severely traumatized for weeks to come. A friend of the family called me for advice.

I don't doubt that those people were sincere. They were quite sincere. But sincerity is not enough. Never was; never will be. Even compassion is not enough. We need wisdom as well.

You can't change people—drug addicts or anyone else—by pinning them to the ground or locking them in ghettos and cages.

I've been reading *Chasing the Scream, the First and Last Days of the War on Drugs* by Johann Hari. Among other things the book exposes a misconception about drug addiction as being solely a chemical dependency.

Many of us have heard about the "rat in the cage experiment." Two bottles were attached to the cage—one with water and the other with heroin-laced water. One solitary rat after another after another killed itself by overdosing on heroin. *There you go, that's what addiction is all about.* End of story.

But no, it's not the end of the story. The story continues.

Years later, in 1970, a scientist in Vancouver put several rats in a large terrarium, a kind of "rat park" with landscaping and tunnels, plus rat-friendly toys and chunks of cheese

along with those two bottles. Guess what: the rats ignored the heroin bottle and lived happily together.

Which is to say (to make a long study short): rats and people primarily crave love and meaning, not drugs, not chemicals. People long for human connection and bonding, which is why some counselors no longer use the word “addiction.” It’s terribly misleading.

As it turns out, people bond with chemicals and devices *if they can’t bond meaningfully with fellow humans*. So it’s not just about chemicals, after all; it’s about love and human connections. Perhaps we can build more parks and fewer cages—if you know what I mean.

There was a time when drug dependency was treated as a health issue not as a crime. People were treated with compassion and wisdom and given the occasional, inexpensive opiate by a pharmacist or doctor that reduced their pain and enabled them to do productive work and live happily with their families.

And then something happened.

One hundred years ago, certain government officials found a way to make using certain drugs a crime, which instantly made drug cartels filthy rich and launched the war on drugs, the prison industry and a reign of terror in this country.

That’s not compassion or wisdom. That’s pinning sick people to the floor! That’s ignorance. And that’s got to change.

Which brings us back to the gospel lesson for today.

The Roman Empire publicly beheaded John the Baptist as a form of terror to keep the Jews, and other peoples in their Empire, submissive and docile. Immediately thereafter, Jesus began proclaiming that the Kingdom or Empire of God was at hand.

He invited four Jewish fishermen, four young men—who lived under the harsh taxation, brutal occupation and bloody sword of the Empire—to leave their jobs behind and follow him, with the hint that they might change the world, you know, the way many young Muslim men and women are invited to follow a certain way that promises to change the world. Most people, as it turns out, want to do meaningful things with their lives.

The four followed Jesus. But Jesus did not march on Rome or launch a war of any kind. He launched a campaign, a movement of teaching and healing.

And he stayed close to home. He stayed in touch with people in his own small world. After all, the Kingdom of God is always at hand if you have eyes to see.

Jesus went to the local synagogue (“meeting house”) and met a man tormented by uncontrollable forces. Jesus spoke to the humanity of the man.

Next Jesus went home with Peter. Peter’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. It wasn’t life threatening but still Jesus went to her, took her hand and lifted her up and just like that her strength was renewed.

That evening the whole city gathered outside the door longing to see Jesus. *The whole city*. Why? *Because that whole city, like the whole world, is longing for healing*. We are all broken in one way or another.

It’s not that we are all guilty sinners who need pardoning; it’s that we are all broken, afraid, and disconnected. We need someone to see us as a human being; someone to offer a hand to get us up on our feet again.

*The next morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said, "Everyone is searching for you." And Jesus replied, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."*

And that prompts this question: *what is it that you've come out to do with your life?*

To practice the healing touch of Jesus doesn't mean we can cure every illness or fix every problem. But it does mean we stay in touch.

We stay in touch with Shenandoah Women's Center and the women it touches. We stay in touch with the Rescue Mission and the men it touches. We stay in touch with the Pilgrimage in Washington and the homeless people it touches. We stay in touch with Coalfield Develop Corp. and the impoverished West Virginians it touches. We stay in touch with the Verbo church in Bluefield, Nicaragua, we stay in touch with Caring Cupboard, with the Jefferson County Homeless Coalition, with Good Shepherd Interfaith Caregivers, with the Community Correction Services Committee and the inmates it touches in MCI, Hagerstown.

And we stay in touch with our troubled children even when we can't fix their lives for them. We stay in touch.

This is a letter sent by a mother to her drug-bonded son living a thousand miles away who was begging to be allowed to move back home with her. She could not allow that. But she sent this letter.

*My darling son,  
because I gave you life,  
our bond and our love are unbreakable.*

*But your life is your own now.  
So I honor your fate  
and return it to your hands  
the responsibility that is rightly yours:  
Your decisions  
Your path  
Your mistakes  
Your triumphs are now fully yours.*

*I do this—  
Not because you've proved yourself capable  
Not because you've earned it  
But because yours are the hands in which your life rightly belongs.*

*While I back away from responsibility  
I will never back away from my love.*

*Go well—grow well.  
Live beautifully into your freedom,  
my beloved son,  
with my complete blessing and unending love.*

*Love, Mom*

We can't fix everything or everybody. Actually, we can't fix anybody. But we can stay in touch. And that, as it turns out, is often enough to bring healing.

