

When Jesus Left the Synagogue

By: Meagan McLaughlin

February 7, 2021. As we gather again for worship in our homes, Pastor Meagan reminds us how Jesus took his ministry out of the synagogue and expanded, into homes and neighboring towns.

Readings: [Isaiah 40:21-31](#), [Mark 1:29-39](#)

*** Transcript ***

Last week the Gospel of Mark told us how Jesus got started in his ministry — the calling of the disciples, the proclamation that the realm of God is here, the amazement of the people at the authority Jesus carried in his teaching and the casting out of the unclean spirit. Jesus spent time in the synagogue and embodied, in what he said and did, the good news of God's love, and claimed in his actions the authority of God, over and above the authority even of the temple.

This week Jesus does something really awesome: he leaves the synagogue. And this feels significant, in this time when it has been almost a year since we have worshipped together in our sanctuary. I personally have worshipped from my guest room, my living room, my backyard, my parents' backyard, my parents' living room. It's been almost a year of worshipping from homes, vacation places, and even once I think from a boogie board! As many times as I have heard this passage, the detail of Jesus leaving the synagogue and taking his ministry to Simon's mother-in-law's house has mostly escaped me. But this year, it seems like just about the most profound thing Jesus could have done as he began his ministry.

A few years back, a Lakota elder shared with a group of United Theological seminarians that Lakota tradition teaches that our stories are rooted in place, not time. And according to that tradition, the valley below Fort Snelling, just blocks from Karen's and my home in the Twin Cities, is the birthplace of creation — a sort of Garden of Eden. It is also the literal birthplace of many Lakota people whose mothers traveled days and weeks to get to that place so their children could be born there. No matter how much time passes, their stories and the story of creation itself are alive there in that sacred place.

And in this experience of exile we have realized, if we didn't before, the sacredness of our temple, our sanctuary where I now stand. So many of you have told me how much it means just to see our altar in my Zoom screen on Sunday mornings. We are all longing for the time when we can return to gathering in person here, hearing the organ live rather than via video, drinking coffee and eating meals together in our Fellowship Hall. If we didn't know it before, we certainly know it now: our sanctuary is sacred space.

And this week, Jesus leaves the sacred space of the synagogue. And the first place he goes, just as we did when we left our building behind, is home. Not his home, of course, but a home — the home of Simon's mother-in-law. And Jesus' ministry does not pause or end when he leaves the synagogue, but expands, as he continues to preach and heal and the word spreads of what he is doing. In a very real way, Jesus demonstrates for us that it is not just the synagogue that is sacred space. We who have celebrated communion in our homes, heard the word in our homes, blessed and celebrated community and even our furry family members in our homes, grieved the death of beloveds in our homes, know this. Home is sacred space, too.

And still, before the end of that first chapter of Mark, Jesus moves again. After what must have been an

exhausting day, as the people of town filled the small home seeking wisdom and healing, Jesus goes to find a deserted place where he could be by himself and pray. Even Jesus believed, as Isaiah so eloquently says, that “Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength.” I am probably not the only one feeling especially worn out these days. I am sure many of you are also done with COVID, ready to celebrate with abandon in this time when we're still called to care for one another with caution. In these days when we are often just one step ahead of weariness and exhaustion, how comforting it is to know that we are not alone — even Jesus needed God to renew his strength.

When the disciples find Jesus, he doesn't return to Simon's mother-in-law's house or to the synagogue, but moves onward once again. Sacred space, as Jesus shows us, is bigger than the temple, bigger than Simon's mother-in-law's house, bigger than the town, and Jesus' ministry expands to neighboring towns. That too is sacred space. In fact, Isaiah tells us, there is no place that God isn't. The God who created all things is present in all, to the very ends of the earth. One of the most sacred places I have ever had the privilege of being was the two-room home of a family in Tanzania, where we sat on bales of hay to eat homemade cakes and drink tea sweetened with rare and precious sugar, served by the mother of five whose face glowed with pride at having something to offer us. All places are sacred.

Mark tells us that one of the things that happens in sacred places is healing. It's worth taking a moment to think about this, as Miss Kate talked about. We are painfully aware with over 400,000 having died from a pandemic that doesn't seem to be done with us yet, although we are certainly done with it, and with the losses we have experienced in our own congregation and our own lives, that healing as we would wish for it doesn't always happen. We know from our own experiences that sometimes mental and physical disease persist despite our best efforts. And that can leave us wondering where our healing, our miracle, our resurrection is. Mark starts his gospel by proclaiming the *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ. But sometimes, when brokenness seems to overwhelm, it can be hard to trust and believe that the good news of Jesus' presence and healing is still happening today.

We are part of this dynamic, transformative, and yes healing Spirit that is always moving and breathing around us. Do we believe that? Do we believe the sequel can happen? What does healing even mean? A colleague who lives with disabilities suggested that healing is not so much a restoration to wholeness physically, as if the person healed was not a complete or full human before, but a restoration to community, dignity, and agency. In the midst of the stories of healing in our gospels, Jesus so often not only offers physical healing, but raises people up, brings them back into community, names their humanity and their dignity. In today's story, Simon's mother-in-law is initially received as one who simply needs care, as an elderly widow who is in fact ill. Jesus goes to her, and yes he removes her fever, but the true transformation is a restoration to dignity and place in community that allows her to serve — to minister, as Jesus and the disciples did — as well as be served.

The question of who receives healing, why and when, is one that we human beings have been wrestling with since the beginning of time, and we still wonder and ask and lament when healing doesn't come as we hope. And yet, as Miss Kate suggested, the promise of God stands. In Christ, we know that even in the face of illness and suffering and death, God is present with us. In Christ, we are seen and known, our dignity as a child of God is assured, our lament is heard by a God who has experienced suffering and death for themselves. The ministry of Jesus expands again, and again, and again, all the way to the cross. And because of that we can trust that even our places of brokenness, loss, and death are sacred.

All places, all time, all lives are sacred. And today, as we gather and worship together on our Zoom screens, we know that more than ever. Christ is present in the sacred space of our homes, bringing the good news of God's love, restoring us to our community in sometimes surprising ways, lifting us up

and renewing our strength when we are exhausted, naming us and calling us beloved, and sending us outward to discover and proclaim the sacredness of God's presence in the places — and the people — around us. And when we come back to our sanctuary, and we will return, we will do so with great joy and celebration, knowing that that is only the beginning.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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