

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, 2009
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

The biblical stories Jesus go beyond being simply tales of his life and teachings. They tell us things about God, life and religion. They challenge us to grow in faith and spirituality, to become more and more an icon of Christ and his servant in this world. So it is with the gospel reading today. You have to look closely at the text. You have to push the story a little bit. But when you do, you see what was truly important to Jesus. You also see his own understanding of his purpose and mission. You learn something about human nature, to boot - the darker side of human nature that wants only the events in life that are pleasing and entertaining, events that do not challenge one to grow beyond the narcissism of personal contentment. The gospel reading, this morning, challenges us to shine the light of Christ into our souls, and deal with whatever that light may illumine.

On the surface, there is not much that is demanding about this morning's gospel reading. Here, we have another of the healing stories, of which the Gospels are filled. It is not dissimilar to that which we read last week, a story about healing a man possessed of an evil spirit. To get to the meat of today's gospel reading, we have to engage it on a second and different level. Mark tells us that the crowds were amazed at what Jesus was doing - healing the sick and restoring the lame. The crowds wanted more of it; yet Jesus walked away. He left the village, to go off on his own to pray. "To pray for what," we ask? The answer is for guidance and direction from his Heavenly Father, so that he might perfectly proclaim God's saving work through himself. Jesus returned from his prayers determined to move on to another place and another thing: healing souls. This determination did not please the multitudes of that village, nor did it please his disciples. The disciples came to him and actually chewed him out. "Where have you been?" they demanded. Don't you know that the people are looking everywhere for you? When Jesus told them that he was finished in that village and ready to move on, notably to proclaim the Kingdom of God, and heal sin-damaged souls and only incidentally bodies, you can imagine what the disciples said, or at least what they thought. "Why would you not do what is pleasing and makes you famous? Stick to a formula that works! If you stick to healing bodies and keep on making wine from water, your power and authority can only grow."

The crowds loved the physical healings. The crowds loved the nature miracles. But the physical healings are not the essence of the Gospels. The nature miracles, such as walking on water, or feeding thousands with a few fish and a few loaves of bread are not the essence of faith. If we build our faith only on such external proofs as outward miracles, and not on repentance and prayerful discipleship, things that lead to the spiritual growth of the soul, we built our spiritual house not on solid ground, but on a shaky ground, a foundation of sand. The first good storm of life will blow it all away.

The miracles of Jesus were certainly signs of the Messiah, as the Old Testament prophets had promised. These were certainly indicators, even symbols of the mighty power of God. But these things were crowd-pleasing things. These things were attention getters,

even though they were good things and reflective of the unconditional love of God. But they were incidental to the messianic work of Jesus. Jesus came into this world, as St. John told us, to save sinners, and sin is a disease of the soul, not the body. The first priority of our Lord was not to heal the sick, or to give the blind their sight. The compelling work of Christ was to heal the spiritually ill, to restore the sight of the spiritually blind, to turn the souls of humanity towards the love of God ultimately and perfectly reflected in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

The problem then and now is that to hear and respond to a Gospel of soul healing requires a new way of thinking, and it requires a radical change in the way that we face and understand life. It requires, first of all and most of all that we acknowledge to ourselves that we are powerless to bring about our own salvation, that there are things beyond our natural abilities, things that God must do for us. The number one thing that God must do for each of us is to set aside our spiritual shortcomings, shortcomings of pride, covetousness, lust and envy so that we become vessels filled with the Holy Spirit, worthy disciples of Christ.

As long as Jesus stuck with healing miracles and nature miracles, no one really objected. It was when Jesus confronted corrupt and broken spirits among people that he got into trouble with the crowds and with the Jewish authorities. Jesus was not crucified for healing the lame. He was crucified because he challenged people to live, as God would have them live, to love God with all of their being, to love their neighbor as they loved themselves.

If we would deepen our spiritual being, if we would truly become what God calls us to be, in discipleship, we have to ask how Christ must heal us, and then we must give our brokenness to Jesus, and let his healing love work in us so that we grow in the glory of God.

Self-awareness is not an easy thing. But God offers us the love and support that enables us to seek such awareness, knowing that, in love, he will set aside anything bad and leave us only with what is good. *Amen.*