

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Eric Howell
The Doorway of the House of the Healer
Mark 1:29-39
February 4, 2024

On the first Sunday of this year, we prayed a blessing over the church house as we've done each year. A blessing can be a powerful act, asking God's grace to manifest in particular ways in a particular place and with a particular person or people. Part of the Epiphany blessing asks God that the doorway of the church would be wide to receive all who need love and the threshold smooth to receive God's children. Doorways and thresholds are important spaces. When closed or small, they can divide what's in and what's out, and sometimes, that is necessary. But more importantly, they serve as inflection points, as transitions, as liminal spaces. This is true no matter where you are. Banks and schools and restaurants, and of course, houses, and churches have doorways and thresholds, too. Eras in life have thresholds of time and experience, communities have them too. You're in one space; you cross the threshold, and you enter another. They are meeting places between what has been and what will be.

Has there ever been a wider doorway or a smoother threshold than the house in Capernaum where Jesus was? The whole city was gathered together at that door.

It was sundown at the end of the sabbath day, which means that everyone had been at rest for the day, yet still somehow, the word had spread. They were whispering to one another over backyard fences about Jesus who that very day in the synagogue had healed a man with an unclean spirit which dramatically came out of him. At the word of Jesus, the man's body and mind were left at peace, finally. On the day of rest, the tormented man could finally rest in his body and in his mind. What is this they all wondered? He commands unclean spirits, and they obey him.

Jesus healed in the synagogue by his word. Later that day, privately, in the house, Jesus healed without speaking a word.

The new disciple Peter's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever. A relatively minor and uncomfortable disruption in modern life, a fever is threatening and uncertain in the ancient world. Fevers kill. But not this day. Jesus doesn't say a word but takes her by the hand. He's not afraid to speak to malevolent forces of darkness, and he's not afraid to touch the untouchable. He takes her by the hand and lifts her up. To lift up are resurrection words. She's up. And she then serves them, which I take to show that she was totally healed. No long recovery time needed for this one who's back on her feet in a jiffy. The word for serve is *deaconoi*, which means she's the first deacon in the gospels. And then she's part of the group that goes out to bring in everyone in the city to the door of her house where Jesus is that he may heal them. The door of her house becomes the gateway to healing. The threshold of her house becomes the pathway to eternal life.

At sundown, the five of them, Peter and Andrew, James and John, and Peter's mother-in-law, the first deacon and first apostles, go out to the streets of the city and bring back to the door of glory everyone they can find who needs healing. What you have seen is true, they said. What you have heard is true. Have you not heard? Have you not seen? Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Who needs healing? We all need spiritual salvation of our souls. We need the good news of God's grace of forgiveness and restoration of our relationship with God. Thanks to God for the grace of salvation through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And just about everyone in some way needs the healing touch of the compassionate heart of God in this life. Even youths will faint and be weary. The young will fall exhausted. God heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Those Fab Five go through the whole city bringing all who need healing to the doorway of Jesus. This is a story of early-stage discipleship in the gospels. It is also a sure and true illustration of prayer today. In prayer, we bring people to Jesus. Our hearts at prayer sweep through the city and the world, guided by the spirit, to find the faces and stories of men and women and communities and people who need God's grace. In the mystery of prayer, take each one by the hand and bring them to the doorway of the house of God. Take them by the hand, walk with them arm in arm, carry them if you have to, whatever it takes, in the strength of intercessory prayer bring the whole city, if not the world, to the wide, wide door of God's house. Bring a young mother racked with cancer to the doorway of Jesus. Bring a dear friend enduring invasive surgery to the doorway of Jesus. Bring a young man dogged with anxiety and depression. Bring a teen with a broken spirit or an eating disorder, a man with early onset dementia, and a colleague with long covid. Bring them all, there's room for all at the doorway of the house of the healer.

Rift and repair is the rhythm of life in the world. We are broken; we are healed; we are torn, we are restored. Athletes know this is the way muscles get stronger. Muscles stretch and tear; the body heals and grows stronger in the broken places. Anyone doing any kind of pre-marital counseling helps couples delight in the joy of their blossoming love and also helps them look around the corner to days yet to come when there will be conflict and hurt feelings and broken hearts. And help them get some tools to mend broken places. Listen well to one another, and really hear what the other is saying. Don't be slow to say I'm sorry, I was wrong. Forgive. Forgive. Forgive. Go on a date. It's a start.

We bring people to the doorway of the house of God for healing. The passages today are all about this. St. Paul goes so far as to say he would do anything to bring people to God. I'll become like anyone; I'll make any sacrifice. I'll do anything to bring people to God so that they may be healed, so they may be saved. Sometimes Paul is thought of as being a rigid, brow-furrowed apostle, but don't you recognize the desperate compassion of love flowing through him? When you see someone hurting and will do anything you can to help.

In many ways, prayers for healing are manifest in people who are giving their lives as agents of God's healing mercy and power. Consider all the people working in healing professions even right now. Doctors and nurses, and if you don't know, then you don't know what they have to do in the middle of some nights. Psychiatrists and psychologists, sitting for hours listening intently; counselors and social workers and hospice caregivers and chaplains. There are empaths who heal our spirits just by their comforting presence with us. Some of the underappreciated heroes of the pandemic era were the scientists who discovered a COVID-19 vaccine in thoroughbred time. That that became so controversial is a sign of just how much we took it for granted. There are healers all around. And it's not that there's a hard division between the healing of the Great Physician and the healing that comes through the healers, it's that they are taking part, you are taking part, in the ministry of the healing of creation's wounds. God works through you who have the ministry of reconciliation.

There are those who are healing the soil by slowly repairing the damage that we've done to it by trodding so heavily upon it. Scientists are repairing rivers that have been polluted, and beaches that are eroding. Marriages are being healed from the worst sorts of pain. Financial counselors help people who are breaking under the crush and shame of their debt. Children growing up in situations that tear their little lives apart are knit together by adults at their schools who are able to see them as more than a problem or a grade, but as a child of God, lovely and loved and worthy of hope.

Not all suffering and not all pain is healed in this life. If the cycle of life is brokenness and repair, rift and restoration, then the cycle of life includes death. Paul says death is the final enemy. Christ overcomes this enemy, and Paul mocks it, "Death where is your victory, where is your sting?" But death does sting, let's be honest. The perishable body must put on the imperishable; this mortal body must put on immortality. Christ has been raised from the dead. Our hope is not in vain.

Yet we still face our mortality. And it's not always on our schedule. St. Francis was only 44 years old when he knew he was dying; his suffering body was giving up. He lived the last few years of his life in constant pain. In his mid-40s, a young man even in that era, was dying. In those dying days, he thanked God for what he called dear Sister Death For him, death was invited in not as an enemy but as a sister. In his famous canticle, the sun and moon, the wind and water, fire and flowers, and death. He received them all as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I'm not sure most people can do this with the lightness of spirit that Francis had. Yet there's something to learn here. At the very least, we can acknowledge that death is part of life's journey. When we're young, most of us don't think about this, and thanks be to God, most of us don't have to. When death comes to the home of a young person, it is a special and profound grief.

As we grow older, we do think about death, and, hopefully, with a growing spiritual maturity. I'd like to speak candidly for a moment, to our older folks and for all who love older folks in your life. Please consider talking with someone you trust while you are still healthy about death

and dying and how you pray about the end of this life, where and how you hope and wonder about what comes after. I think there's a superstition that if you talk about it you're asking for it, but that's not true. Or there's an idea that you're being grim, but that doesn't have to be true either. I think openness to an honest appraisal of our mortality can be a doorway to a kind of spiritual freedom, inviting the conversation in like a sister. Some questions to consider may be: do you have wishes for your funeral? Some people do; tell someone. Do you have intentions for your earthly possessions, and are they in a will? How will you bless others through your intentions for what you leave behind if you have something to leave behind?

Here's what may be most important: have you talked about an advanced directive, sometimes called a living will? It's a decision made with loved ones about healthcare when life is sustained not by the strength of your body and spirit but by machines and medicines. Phrases like DNR, Do not resuscitate, and comfort care, palliative care, and hospice are not so scary when you can talk about them, pray about them ahead of time with people who love you. I speak to you from years of watching beautiful and terrible things, and I speak to you from close and personal experience. Talk to someone. Face the reality. Let it be a sister, not an enemy.

We talk about having dignity in the grief of letting go of life, but I think there's even more. I think there is grace here. We are not in total control of these things and that's part of the grace. At birth and death, we are not masters of our universe. We never are. It's all an illusion if we think we are.

But also, we are not alone. In suffering, your beloveds are with you. God is with you. We trust God for the life to come; we trust God in this life. You are not alone at the threshold of suffering and death when that day comes. And it comes for us all. There is a time when the doorway and the threshold where Jesus stands is the doorway from this life to the next, where he takes us all by the hand and lifts us to a new life.

But I come back to this image from the Gospel. It's beautiful. The whole city congregated at the door of this house. Jesus stands there and sees them all coming, the sick, the blind, a leper, those who appear to have it together on the outside as they stride down the street, but inside they are tormented; those who don't like themselves and don't know what to do with that; those who come wondering if anyone would love me if they really knew me; the jaded and cynical who wish they weren't; and those whose hearts are breaking. They all come, drawn by a mystery and a power larger than themselves, they come that night as the sun sets in the golden hour to the doorway of the house. And he's standing there, waiting. Come in. Come in. You're home. Come into my house.

Thanks to God. Amen.