

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Jody McDevitt, Co-Pastor

February 8, 2009  
*5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
Mark 1:29-39

### Where Hope Meets Power

On the west coast of Scotland, among the islands known as the Inner Hebrides, is a small island called Iona which has played a large role in Scottish history, especially Scottish Christian history. Dan and I were privileged to spend a few days on this damp and mystical island at the beginning of our sabbatical, in September. If you come to adult Sunday School next week (9:30 in the library!), you can learn more about Iona and the ecumenical Christian community which takes its name from the island. But today I want to share with you just one aspect of Iona's ministry—because it resonates with today's gospel reading.

It takes a lot of effort to get to Iona. From Glasgow, you can take a train or bus to Oban; from Oban there is a large ferry that sails to the island of Mull; then a bus ride across that island to a smaller ferry, across the water to Iona. All in all, it's about 6½ hours from Glasgow—and that's the closest city.

Yet with the exception of a few short weeks in November and December, every other week of the year the population of Iona swells far beyond its 125 year-round residents. Thousands of visitors travel to Iona each year. The weekly rhythm of that swelling, of course, is tied to the weekends, but there is also a midweek bulge on Tuesdays. Because on Tuesday evenings at 9 o'clock, the Iona Community holds its weekly service of prayer for healing, including the laying on of hands, in the restored medieval Iona Abbey.

Now, worship in the Iona Abbey is always beautiful, and there are services held every morning and every evening throughout the year. But get there early if you want a seat on Tuesday evenings. This is a very popular service. Although Scotland, like the rest of the United Kingdom and most of Europe, is today a secular society where most of the churches have very small worshipping congregations on most Sunday mornings, people come from all over for this particular service at Iona. They come to sing their prayer and hear their song reverberate off the ancient stones; they come with hopes and fears to ask for personal healing; they come because they are desperate about someone they love, and they have heard that God is really near at Iona; they come because they believe—or are willing to take a chance that it might be true—that Christ can heal their sorrow. They come, and they follow the liturgy which prays, every Tuesday evening, these words.

God our Creator, we are held in your everlasting arms.

Jesus our Saviour, we are healed by your wounded hands.

Holy Spirit, be present as we reach out to one another in love.

*(Iona Abbey Worship Book, Wild Goose Publications, 2001, p. 95)*

And then those who desire the laying on of hands are invited to move forward, to kneel, to say their concern if they wish, and then as they feel the touch of others on their shoulders, to hear the community pray for them:

Spirit of the living God, present with us now,  
enter you, body, mind and spirit,  
and heal you of all that harms you,  
in Jesus' name. Amen.

*(Iona Abbey Worship Book, p. 91)*

The power of Jesus to heal attracted crowds in first century Palestine. The power of Christ to heal still draws a crowd.

There is no question that Jesus had the gift of healing. Sometimes with a word, sometimes with a touch, sometimes using what was at hand, like mud or water, Jesus healed people with fevers, those who could not walk, the blind, the deaf, the bleeding, those with skin diseases. All the gospel writers testify to this. He also, they tell us, could cast out demons, healing people of what we might understand today as mental illness, or epilepsy, or some other trouble in their soul. But this gift did not make him unique in his world. Just as there have been shamans and holy men and holy women and healers in most cultures, first century Palestine was a place where human needs were often met by healers. Some set up shop in a village, and some traveled from place to place. Jesus was good at this, not a quack, and word of his gift spread quickly throughout Galilee.

So, Mark tells us, “they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door.” (Mk 1:32-33) He could have gone into business, this carpenter from Nazareth, as Capernaum’s resident doctor—all he needed to do was hang up a shingle, establish office hours, and set his fees for services. Instead, he slips town in the wee hours of the night, and goes out to where the crowds couldn’t find him. And when his friends do locate him, they see that he is praying. They must wonder why, or what he is praying about. Is it “compassion fatigue?” Did all those needy persons wear him out? Is it a vocational turning point? Does he need God’s guidance to know whether this newfound popularity is something to listen to?

I think it is a momentary identity crisis for Jesus, a time to clarify his mission. For when Simon and his companions tell Jesus that there are more people seeking his miracle cures, he’s needed back in town, c’mon, let’s go, he gives them a different answer. His mission is not to stay in Capernaum, even though he hasn’t healed everyone there yet. His mission is to move on, to visit more towns, to proclaim the message “out there,” wherever “out there” may be. “For that is what I came out to do,” he says.

His mission is to proclaim the message, and the message is that the kingdom of God has come near. Casting out demons and healing the sick are signs of the nearness of the kingdom. They are symbolic acts which demonstrate God’s power over all which causes suffering and sorrow. They are expressions of God’s desire that all persons be whole in body, mind, and spirit, and they are manifestations of the kingdom of God breaking into the world. But the message cannot be kept in one needy village, nor reduced to the ministry of one powerful healer. The message is for the whole world, and the message is Jesus himself. ***The message is that the healing of the whole world is available in Christ. This is God’s will and desire.***

For in Christ, the kingdom of God has come near. All our longings, all our needs, all our hopes and all our fears are known by God in Christ—and at the same time, all God’s power, all God’s compassion, all God’s love is embodied in one very human man, Jesus. In desperation and hope, we human beings reach out to Jesus, and in power and compassion, he reaches out to us. The message is all about relationship, the restoration of our relationship with God our maker, our parent, the One who loved us into being. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, asserting that wholeness and peace are God’s will for all creation. God in Christ begins the new creation, healing the brokenhearted and

binding up their wounds (Ps 147:3). God in Christ gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless (Is 40:29). God in Christ answers our desperate cries for help with powerful assurances of hope, for in Christ, the kingdom of God has come near!

Even though, for all its nearness and all its glory, the kingdom of God was not complete in first century Capernaum, nor is it fully realized today. It doesn't take a rocket scientist, or an historian, or a skeptic to see that people are still suffering and wars are still being fought and the poor are still being oppressed in the year of our Lord 2009. Even those of us who are mightily blessed by modern medicine and American prosperity might feel as neglected as the townspeople in Capernaum who were left at the door. For our prayers for healing are not always answered as we want them to be, and sometimes our suffering in the world seems undeserved and unending. We can rage at God; we can plead with God; but in the end, sometimes our only peace with God comes from bowing before the mystery and trusting in God's eternal goodness.

And then, like Simon's mother-in-law, getting up and ministering in the way of Christ. It was her miracle cure that started the flood of needy people coming to the door in Capernaum. But she wasted no time in self-pity asking why she fell sick in the first place, or in self-praise, saying she deserved the cure. No, when Jesus lifted her up, she joyfully resumed her place in the household's relationships, getting the meal for the honored guests. Her strength came from God for a purpose—to serve others. So she did. The people I admire most in life are those who have endured some of life's greatest hardships, yet who see their lives as blessed. So they give, rather than whine. They radiate joy, not complaint. They are healed, though their situations may not be cured, because their souls are at peace with God. They can say with a smile, "The world may knock me down, but Jesus picks me up!" I don't know about you, but that's the kind of person I want to be. For in such a person, the message of Christ is clear—the Kingdom of God has come near, giving wholeness and peace and unity with God.

In Jesus Christ, human hope meets heavenly power. Praise be to God..

I close with one more prayer from the Iona service of prayer for healing. Please pray with me.

God of compassion and love,  
 we offer you all our suffering and pain.  
 Give us strength to bear our weakness,  
 healing even when there is no cure,  
 peace in the midst of turmoil  
 and love to fill the spaces in our lives.  
 Glory to God, from whom all love flow,  
 Glory to Jesus, who showed his love through suffering,  
 and glory to the Holy Spirit,  
 who brings light to the darkest places.  
 Amen.

*(Iona Abbey Worship Book, p. 97)*