Sunday, February 9, 2003
EVERYONE IS SEARCHING
Mark 1:29-39

Today's story from the gospel of Mark continues where we left off last weekend. In that story, the people who heard Jesus teach were impressed with him, for he "taught them as one having authority." Then he healed a man in a synagogue who had an unclean spirit, and they were even more amazed at his power and authority. In that sermon, I described some of the varieties of unclean spirits that you and I have in our lives today. Some of the unclean spirits which have taken possession of people in today's world include pride, revenge, gluttony, envy, and sloth. That's the short list.

Now, Mark tells you that as soon as they left the synagogue where Jesus had healed the man with the unclean spirit, they entered the house of Simon Peter and Andrew. In that house, Simon Peter's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about it. Jesus went into the bedroom, took her by the hand, and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she went to work in the kitchen preparing food for them. It sounds very much like some mothers-in-law and mothers I have known — they can't be sick long because there's always work to be done. It also reminds me of my siblings and me growing up. We couldn't be sick for very long because we each had our work to do.

What I like best about this part of the story is the phrase, "Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up." A few years ago, I did a sermon based on this phrase. You've had the experience of taking someone by the hand in a loving manner, or having someone take your hand in a loving gesture, and you've experienced how much this can mean.

Frequently when I visit someone in the hospital or a nursing home, I will take the person gently by the hand while saying a prayer. I remember one particular visit where this made a big difference.

I was visiting a man in the hospital, and I had been told by a family member that the patient had only a few days or maybe even a few hours to live. As I stood by his bedside, I took one of his hands in mine. Although he was unable to speak, he opened his eyes briefly and gave me a beautiful smile in recognition. Then I asked the family members present to join hands, and together we had a prayer at the bedside. It was obvious to me from the way the dying man was clasping my hand that he was comforted not only by the prayer but by our joining of hands. A few hours later, he died.

The family members later commented that our time together had brought peace to them as well.

Jesus knew how important human touch can be. The gospels are filled with stories of him reaching out with his hands to gently touch people and of people reaching out to touch him.

Whenever I read this story about Jesus taking the hand of Peter's mother-in-law and lifting her up, I recall one of my very favorite hymns—"Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand."

Perhaps you remember, as I do, that when you were a child and were sick, how good it felt to have your mother or father take your hand and gently hold it. Or maybe when you were overly nervous or afraid, you remember how comforting it was to have someone hold your hand.

Some years ago, when I had surgery with a local anesthetic, one of my most comforting memories is of a nurse gently holding each of my hands in hers while the surgery was taking place and at the same time describing to me the progress of the surgery and reassuring me that it would soon be over. Her caring was communicated through her gentle touch and manner. I can still recall the warmth of her hands.

In his book Love, Medicine, and Miracles, Dr. Bernie Siegel underscores the value of human touch in the relationship between physicians and patients. He claims it not only helps the patient but has helped him as well.

Here's part of what he wrote: "First I began by gently hugging patients, figuring they needed my reassurance. Later I found I was saying, 'I need to hug you,' so that I could go on. And even if they were on respirators, my patients reached out to me with a touch or a kiss, and my guilt, fatigue, and despair evaporated. They were saving me."

Reaching out with your hand to hold the hand of another person can have amazing results. There's a phrase we often hear: "When you go out into the larger world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together."

That's the first theme in this story from Mark's gospel — the healing power of human touch. Not only did Jesus have that power, but you also have it too. When you take someone by the hand in a gentle, loving way, through you, God is taking that hand and touching that person. Your touch can be the touch of God.

Harold "Pee Wee" Reese died in August 1999. In addition to his skill as a shortstop and being on seven pennant-winning teams and the 1955 world championship Brooklyn Dodgers, he is also remembered for another important reason. When his Dodgers teammates protested the hiring of Jackie Robinson as the first African-American major league baseball player, Reese refused to sign the petition. Furthermore, at the start of the 1947 season, when the crowd in Philadelphia was booing Robinson, Reese trotted over to second base, gave his teammate a handshake, and offered him a hug. That gesture of inclusion signaled to his teammates, the National League, and the fans that Pee Wee Reese valued and respected Jackie Robinson as a human being and as a teammate. His touch was like the touch of God.

There's a second theme in this story. That same evening, according to Mark's gospel, many people came to the house, bringing the sick and those who were possessed by demons. The news of the healing power of Jesus had spread quickly. What a comforting picture. The street in front of the house is filled with people needing healing. What a good image for the church I love — the place where human need, whatever it is, encounters the healing presence of Jesus, the place where the human search, the seeking of happiness, well-being, wholeness, and salvation, is found. It's what the invitation above our main front doors states: "Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Then early the next morning, Mark tells us, while it was still dark, Jesus got up and found a deserted place to pray. When the disciples woke up, they went looking for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."

“Everyone is searching for you.” That’s another major theme in this story. In the deepest sense, that’s still the case. Perhaps many in our culture think of themselves as too sophisticated or too secular to use this language, but everyone is searching for the love of God as expressed in Jesus. It’s another way of saying, as Dr. Herbert Benson states, “human beings are wired for God.” You have built within you an appetite, a longing for God. You have this because you were created in God’s image.

The Psalmist wrote: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”

If you don’t want to use “God language,” you might express the same idea in other ways. Your search for God might be expressed in your search for moral authenticity, or in your search for a meaningful and fulfilling community, or in your search for goodness, or in your search for meaning in your life, or in your search for the sacred, or in your search to love and be loved.

You could be someone who has heard too much religious language, and therefore it has little meaning to you, but you are searching nonetheless.

I once had a conversation with a university student who said, “I’m not interested in getting to heaven. When I hear ‘saved’ people talking about how great it will be when they are dead, I have to wonder what they must think about their life right now if they are so enthusiastic about wrapping it up. I’m also not worried about hell. I don’t feel all that guilty.”

I asked, “What do you worry about?” The student answered with words something like this, as I remember it: “I want to do something useful with my life. I worry about whether or not I can make a difference in this world. Who needs me? Many of my friends are having difficulty finding a decent job. Does life have meaning?” She went on to say: “I thought I wanted to major in business. But every time I read the newspaper, the stories are about corporate leaders who are only interested in getting all they can for themselves. Why does one CEO need ten mansions?” This young woman was searching for God.

I hear similar stories all the time. What many people need to be saved from today is not a fear of death or a crippling sense of guilt. It’s the gnawing suspicion that life has no overall purpose or meaning. The search for purpose and meaning is the search for God.

As I said earlier, that’s the third theme of this story from Mark’s gospel. Notice the action. The news had spread rapidly that Jesus was in the area, and as a result, “everyone was searching for him.” Jesus recognizes human need of the most basic type — a man with an unclean spirit, some habit or addiction which is holding him back; and an elderly woman’s physical ailment.

He cares enough. He has compassion. He takes into himself the human pain and fear of the man described as having an unclean spirit and of the aging woman whose place in life has lost much of its meaning. She wonders, “Who needs me?” as she lives with her daughter and son-in-law, trying somehow to be useful.

Jesus made them well. Both were restored. The woman got up from her bed and went to work serving. Everybody heard about it and came searching for him.

This is what all people are searching for — the sense that God notices, the affirmation that you are not alone in whatever need you have, the knowledge and experience that someone truly

cares about you. You also want the confirmation that your life has a meaning beyond yourself, that you are a part of some larger, good, constructive purpose.

That's why Jesus said to his disciples at the end of this little story from Mark's gospel, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do." He knew that everyone is searching and that he had the answer to their search. Amen.