
THEOLOGICAL THERAPY

MARK 1:29-39

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2024

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It's theological therapy. It's a story about Jesus's work of healing—from the word *therapouo* in Greek. This story from Mark's Gospel invites a conversation about God, God-talk, theology, if you will, and healing. It's theological therapy. Conversations about healing in the Bible and what we can expect of healing in our present time are hard because they are rife with uncertainty, difficult questions, and doubt. Because our experiences and our science don't regularly testify to miracles of physical healing in the way the Bible seems to describe them, we can feel a tension about what to do with these healing stories and what to expect for healing in our own lives. Things get even more complicated when the healings include Jesus casting out demons to make people well. Conversations about demons are messy at best. Sometimes the modern church has outright dismissed the topic as unenlightened, backward, and embarrassing, and therefore perhaps only of metaphorical value, if that. At other times, the church has demonized certain illnesses, especially mental illnesses, and not allowed those who are ill to be treated by trained physicians and therapists, opting only for attempted exorcisms. And still other times, demons have been a convenient scapegoat for bad behavior in individuals or among groups. So, perhaps needless to say, I enter this theological therapy conversation with much fear and trembling, and often with more questions than answers.

This morning, I want us to listen to the story from the Gospel of Mark about Jesus's healing to see what it might teach us about God's healing work, about theological therapy. Let's approach the story in two ways: first individually and then as the church. Reflecting on this story individually, let's attend to it as one in need of healing and freedom. Look. There you are, listening as one laid out with fear, waiting for Jesus to make you well. You are ready for Jesus to enter your home and lift you up, ready for him to raise you from your sickness. You know the healing he offers isn't merely physical nor is it only spiritual—it's a holistic healing you seek. As hard as it is to believe in the miracle of physical healing, your hope and trust is that Jesus nevertheless will come to the place of your vulnerability and pain and touch you to make you well. It's a little resurrection for you, a reminder of a future where God will lift you up once and for all in resurrection glory. Your fervent prayer is that Jesus will heal you so that like Simon's mother-in-law you can serve the Lord. Jesus did it for her. He may in fact do it for you, too.

For any who are walking in this faith, this story speaks of how in his compassion Jesus goes right to where we are laid out, sick, and unable to make ourselves well, and he touches us. His healing and restoring touch returns us to our place within community where we can serve Christ and others. We ultimately long for resurrection. We want to be lifted up, raised, just as Jesus was raised after three days, and we have faith it can be so. We believe these little resurrections, these healings, are merely gestures toward God's future that is coming for us, and we long for them still. Mark's Gospel story makes it clear that theological therapy calls for immense faith in our resurrecting God.

I should be perfectly clear that in this talk of Christ's work of healing, I am not saying the only doctor we need is Jesus or that he is the only mental health provider we should visit. Surely medical experts in the various health fields are good gifts from God. Yet, I don't believe God has outsourced all the healing God wants to do in our lives—be it physical, emotional, mental, relational, or spiritual. So we should not stop seeking Jesus's healing touch even as we seek other forms of professional help. At times we're needing the healing only Jesus can provide.

Perhaps in our individual reading of this story, you identify with the one brought to Jesus by another who knew your need. Maybe you even asked for it because you knew you couldn't simply wait on Jesus to come to you. Now you're hoping and praying that he will heal you from your pain—be it spiritual, emotional, relational, physical, mental, you name it. You're longing for Jesus to deliver you from the things that have bound you. You know what's kept you on the outside of deep relationships and intimate community, the things that have stopped you from having abundant life. Whatever the healing is that God may give and however it may be given, you just need Jesus to restore you to a meaningful life within yourself and with others. You hear how the whole town showed up, and Jesus healed many who were sick and cast out demons. Now you are ready for it to happen to you. Jesus did it for them. He may in fact do it for you, too.

For any who are abiding in this trust, this story demonstrates how when Jesus heals people or releases them from their captivity and oppression, they are restored to relationship and community. Healing isn't simply for the individual; it is for making the community whole. This means Jesus's healing or casting out oppressive forces in our lives is not so we'll never be sick or die, but it's so we can be full participants in the community God creates. This kind of restoration of community requires a deep trust from all involved. Mark's Gospel story makes it clear that theological therapy calls for incredible trust.

Yet, maybe your experience is more like those who didn't make it to Jesus that night. Now Jesus is gone, apparently to pray alone or preach in the next city. Jesus's new location doesn't much matter because you've been missed, passed over in this opportunity for healing. Perhaps the disappointment, hopelessness, fear, and anger you feel at not being healed, at not being freed from the oppression and bondage you know so intimately, is overwhelming. Maybe you're asking, "How is Jesus going to leave when so many still need healing? When I still need healing?" We all have questions about why some get healed or freed or let loose from what binds them while others are seemingly left behind to keep struggling or to die. And these questions are even more challenging and painful when it is you or your loved one who remains ill or in the grips of some oppressive thing.

For any who are struggling to find hope, this story leaves room for questions to remain. Jesus says he must go and proclaim the message in other towns. The message of salvation, of that holy balm, that divine healing, must be spread to other places as well. Jesus must continue to preach the word of God's coming reign where all disease, and demons, and even death will be overcome for good. And while Jesus's mission is bigger than individual healing, and we recognize that his healings are an overflow of his compassion for people, we are nevertheless left wondering why our infirmity wasn't cured or why our loved one was not made well or why community has not

been restored where we need it most. That some receive healing and restoration in the present and others don't will likely be a mystery that keeps Jesus's disciples chasing after him, hunting him down and asking him to return to the place he seems to have left. While some try to wrap this lack of healing with a tidy bow of theological reasoning, the nagging questions linger unresolved for many, including this preacher. Yet in our questions, perhaps even because we continue to question, a spark of hope in God's coming future remains. Mark's Gospel story makes it clear that theological therapy surely calls for incalculable hope.

We've listened to this story as individuals, now let's listen as God's gathered people, as the church, to hear what the story reveals about the kind of place God's people are called to create and the kind of people we are called to be. Jesus's disciples, Simon and Andrew, along with James and John, take Jesus back their home. When they arrive, they immediately share the need of their loved one with him. It's as if one of the first roles of discipleship is to share with Jesus spaces of great need in our lives. Sometimes that great need is our own. Sometimes it is the needs of our loved ones. Regardless, Simon, the one later called Peter, the rock on whom the church is built, tells Jesus about the healing that needs done, and Jesus acts.

An essential aspect of the life of the church is to be a place where sicknesses of all kinds can be made known. Now don't get me wrong, this is surely uncomfortable and vulnerable and messy. It's all the kinds of things that are hard for us. But without the freedom to name our needs, to express how we or those we care about are sick and share our longing for healing, we're liable to miss the touch of God that we all so desperately need. When we share our infirmities with our savior and others, Jesus's compassion at times overflows in little resurrections, in raising people from the sickbeds of life, as a foreshadowing of a yet future healing and final glory. Perhaps you've been longing for the church to be a people who are both authentic enough to name the illnesses that threaten our very lives and compassionate enough to invite Jesus to work miracles of healing and grace. The good news is Jesus is calling the church to be this kind of people. The hard news is, that people must be us. A theological therapy like this surely calls for immense faith.

The story goes on to say that the disciples brought all who were sick and demon possessed to Jesus. The whole city came to witness the healing and releasing that Jesus was going to do. While they were there, Jesus healed many who were sick with various diseases and cast out demons. When Jesus touches those we love and makes them well, Christ's followers go and bring everyone who has need of Jesus's touch to encounter him. For the church, it's not enough only to invite our closest people to experience this healing. The church is to invite and include all who've been on the outside because of their illnesses or their apparent or real bondage. When God's gathered people come together as this kind of church, some—perhaps many—will experience real emotional, physical, spiritual, and communal healing.

I wonder if you can imagine bringing the most disruptive and destructive people you know, those most controlled or dominated by powers hell bent on evil rather than good, with you to encounter Jesus and receive his healing touch. Maybe the person who comes to your mind is a family member or co-worker, a neighbor or former friend. If we would gather with those who came to your mind, I suspect the church would have a different kind of reputation than it often

does. Instead of being known for walling ourselves away from the broken and bound up or for being too concerned with appearing put together and thus hypocritical, perhaps the church would be known as a hospital for the sick and a home for those needing and being healed. Perhaps we too would experience deeper healing and freedom within our own lives, allowing us to participate more fully in the community of God's people. A theological therapy like this surely calls for incredible trust.

The last scene of the story also speaks to the role of the church. Jesus slips away to pray and then to go and preach in other towns. Simon and his companions hunt Jesus down, letting him know that others are still looking for him. It's impossible to know the full motive of the disciples' fervent search for Jesus. Yet, I suspect at least part of their reason was they knew that some were not yet healed, some had yet to be freed fully from their bondage, and some who had been healed and freed would surely need Jesus's touch again. But Jesus tells them he must go on spreading the message of God's coming kingdom in other places. As good as the healing and the freeing work that he did was, it is not the full story. And though some were left still longing to be made well, seeking their own miracles, the good news for all people and all creation transcends personal circumstances, as important as those are.

Though the church constantly calls on Christ to continue healing among the people right here and right now, the church lives in waiting for the fulfillment of our resurrection hope in Jesus. The church is called to persist in faith and trust amid the toughest questions about why Jesus hasn't yet healed or cured or freed or released some or all of us. This persistence in faith and trust is called hope. A theological therapy like this surely calls for incalculable hope.

Theological therapy's prescription is for faith, trust, and hope. The good news is, if you're in short supply of these today, you've come to the right place. At its best, the church shows up again and again on Sundays and throughout the week to give and receive mercy and forgiveness, to hear a word from the Lord, to pray and be prayed for, to experience the healing touch of anointing oil, and to be welcomed at the table of grace and community. In these practices and with this people, we encounter the Great Physician who is still in the business of healing, delivering, and restoring. It's theological therapy. Thanks be to God. Amen.