

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Gospel, Year B

STAYING ON MESSAGE

Mark 1:29-39

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1 29As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' 38He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' 39And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

DIAGNOSIS: Off Message

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Sickness Everywhere

Even though the text is filled with sick people, the primary

locus of the problem in this text rests on Simon, aka Peter, who, in Mark, often stands in as representative of all disciples. Though he is not sick, he is overwhelmed by a world of sickness. First, as he arrives home from synagogue, he finds his mother-in-law sick. Thankfully, Jesus is there to cure her. But, then, to make matters worse, as Jesus' fame (for casting out a demon, 1:25) spreads throughout Galilee, Peter's house was deluged with the sick and possessed of the "whole city" looking for miracles.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Panic: Searching for a Miracle Worker Peter's deeper problem concerns his perception of Jesus. He seems quite fine as long as Jesus is present as a miracle worker. But once Jesus departs to a deserted place to pray and ceased curing the sick and casting out demons—panic sets in! He lost faith in Jesus; he did not trust that Jesus had their best interests at heart by going off to a "deserted place" (an allusion to the cross) to pray. And so Peter and his companions desperately search for the Jesus whom they wanted as a miracle worker. "Jesus," he says in a panic, "everyone is looking for you" (v. 37). They want more miracles. I want more miracles, too! He can see in Jesus nothing more than a miracle worker.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Peter: Missing the Messages

What Peter fails to see is that a world filled with sickness (bodies out of order) and overtaken with panic (hearts out of order) are signs of an even a deeper problem: a world sick with "sin," out of order with God and consigned to death under law (cf. 2:1-12). For that, miracles are like Band-Aids. They might cover-up the surface symptoms of sin for a while but they can't take it away. For the wages of sin (a sinner's just deserts under law), as Paul says, is death. Therefore, Peter is actually misreading two messages from God. The deep message of the law

concerning sin that is embedded in disease and our panic over it, and the deep message of Jesus bringing the reign of God that is embedded in his miracles. Tragically, to misread those message is to leave us sin-sick and outside of his reign.

PROGNOSIS: On Message

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus: Staying on Message

The good news begins with Jesus “staying on message.” After Peter and his companions find Jesus, Jesus does not indulge their panic over the overwhelming numbers of sick by accepting their desire for him to be a miracle worker. He says, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns so I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do” (v. 38). Actually, the more clear sign of Jesus’ message for this sin-sick world is not that he performed miracles, but that he “went off to a deserted place and there he prayed” (v. 35). As that activity indicates, his proper work is not to do miracles but to mediate for us there with God. Jesus’ message is that he is the mediator between sinful humanity and a holy God, not a miracle worker. And where do we see the terms of this mediation become reality? In that “deserted place” called “the Skull” (15:22), the place of death, where he negotiates, mediates, with God the terms of reconciliation. The negotiation is symbolized in the reference to Psalm 22. Jesus begins the negotiation by putting himself in our place, in that deserted place meant for us, the cross, and pleads “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1, Mark 15:34). Mark could well have included the last verse of the Psalm (22:31) to give us a hint as to the outcome of the negotiation: “proclaim his deliverance to the people yet unborn, saying that he had done it.” But instead, he lets the event of the resurrection of Jesus speak for itself (15:6-7). “Terms won! For both God and humanity. Jesus has done it.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Confidence: Trusting in the Mediator

Mark gives us no textual clues as to how the disciples internally received Jesus invitation, “let us go to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also... (v. 38). But the fact that they went, that they continued to follow, must mean that their panic subsided and they had gained some measure of confidence in Jesus—that he knew what he was doing! Here we see a point that will reverberate throughout the Gospel of Mark. The “greatness” of Christian faith is not measured in terms of our subjective feeling, our self-confidence, but in terms of being “caught” by Christ’s message as mediator, Christ-confidence.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Proclaiming Everywhere

While we may not expect to see miracles everywhere, all the time, we can expect to hear the proclamation of Jesus’ message everywhere, all the time. And what’s more, it will come to pass that his message will also be heard from his disciples, like Peter, like us, as we continue to follow Jesus and learn more and more what it means that he is the mediator between sinful humanity and holy God.