

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

HEALING THE FEVER

Mark 1:29-39

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

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 [Jesus] 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.

32That evening, at sundown, 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.

35In 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 neighboring 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: The Fever

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Alive, Yet Dying*
Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a "fever" (v. 30), and many others "were sick or possessed with demons" (v. 32). Illness is the common lot of us all ("the whole city," v. 33), and is often exclusionary; indeed, illness in one form or another leads inexorably to death. No wonder that health is so desired by so many and illness is kept at a distance. For this reason hospitals, which were invented by the Church, have been welcome additions to the framework of modern society. But though we pay an ever-staggering price, the results are mixed. Even Jesus' healings were temporary. The truth is that life, despite all our efforts, is also a dying, a "struggle for existence" as Darwin put it. Without the struggle for life, life itself would wither away. But with the struggle also comes the flowering of life and everything we call "good." This is a paradox of God's Law. The question is: Is the goodness of life good enough? To that question, death is an answer; indeed an answer from God.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Really Sick, Really Dying*

The correlation in the text between bodily sickness and demonic possession suggests that our outward dying conceals a far worse internal dying, for which there is not even a temporary fix. We only appear to be in control of our situation: we work very hard to find new ways to heal ourselves, and we feverishly devote ourselves to the effort in full knowledge of death's ever-creeping shadow. What we don't recognize, however, is that we are still sick even when we are not sick. We are possessed, as it were, with a sickness-of-heart that is even worse than any bodily dying. Not only are we hard-wired to our quest for health and beauty and immortality . . . what's worse, we simply cannot trust the One in whom we need to trust, in order to deliver us both from death and from our self-serving selves. Thus, the real

fever, the real dying, is within—a “sickness unto death” as Kierkegaard put it. God’s Law consigns us to death; yet it is only by dying to ourselves that the Law can be overcome. On the surface, our fevered self-reliance forces us to rely on others, “hunting” and “searching” (vv. 36-37) for the best talent or the best cure out there. So we become a society rather than mere individuals, becoming stronger together than we could ever be in isolation. The question is: Can we, can our society, overcome our “fever” for self-preservation? To that question, hunger and war and the eventual decline of civilization is only a partial answer. But just below the surface, deep in the heart where our ultimate allegiance lies, our fever of self-reliance continues as strong as ever. To this problem, the necessity of Christ dying “for us” is God’s final answer.

Notice that Jesus “would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him” (v. 34). One way to understand this verse is by asking ourselves: “What would the demons have to say, if they were allowed to speak?” Answer: “Nothing at all!” Because demons have no reality apart from the sicknesses they engender. If this answer is not satisfactory to some, then the alternative is that Jesus has merely been playing “musical demons” with the sick, and more sick people are needed to house the ousted demons. Whichever explanation we allow to be more correct, we cannot permit the personification of demons to be a crutch for those who are really sick, really dying.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Dying Without Christ*
In spite of the adoring crowds, healing the sick was not what Jesus “came out to do” (v. 38). He is not the final answer to our bodily needs, or even to what the world calls our spiritual nature. And yet, having discovered such a healer, the sick have unwittingly stumbled upon the only One who can truly heal them; so they relentlessly search him out (vv. 36-37), but only to be healed. Here then is a clue to the truth of the matter: Without

Christ's own life and promise, we remain really sick, really dying. We remain in our sins and under the full judgment of God. The question here cannot simply be: "Will we trust Christ with our life, even if that means dying with him?" For, having found him, we will inevitably choose to claim autonomy over ourselves. So if this is remains the only question, then our honest answer will have to be "No"—even though we manage ever so piously to convince ourselves otherwise. But the true question is neither for us to ask or answer; it is rather one for God alone, both to ask and to answer: "Will God be merciful to me, a sinner?"—for, if not, all is lost.

PROGNOSIS: The Healing

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Healer*

Despite the acclamation of the crowds, Jesus did not reduce his ministry to healing the sick, but made "proclaiming the message" (vv. 38-39; literally "preaching") his paramount concern. This preaching is summarized in 1:15, which may be translated, "The time has come! God's reign is here! Turn your life over to God and trust in this good news!" In Jesus, God has begun his reign of peace and forgiveness! God's dominion over life and death—and our fevered lostness—is partly demonstrated in Jesus' healings (because they imply an end to demonic possession), but it is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in his crucifixion and resurrection. God unmasked sin and death for what they really are and trumped them with his own life and love. God made good on his promise to be our God throughout all generations. In Christ our Healer, God is our mercy—"our Father."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Healed and Hospitalized*

Jesus did not need the crowds to validate his ministry. What he needed, continually, was communion with his Father in prayer (v. 35). This was, and is, the cornerstone of his life. In like

manner, the crowds do not validate our lives or our vocations. Beyond the little confirmations we get from others in order to be recognized and appreciated, what validates us before God is God's promise to us in Jesus. Receiving God's promise—that is, trusting in Christ (1:15)—is itself the healing of our “fever” for self-sustaining life. Being wholly dependent on the One who has already put death behind him is itself salvation (from the Latin *salvus*, “safe or healthy”). Thus “possessed” by Christ, we are really well, really alive.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Christic Hospitality*

Having received the promise, we are no longer feverish for ourselves but now for the health and welfare of others. Like Jesus, we do not reduce our ministry to bodily healing or to social work. Though we are servants to the world, even at the cost of our lives, we are foremost servants of Christ, our lives being safe in him, so as to proclaim his life of love and his promise of mercy. In these ministries, we—the Church—are a true hospital. Not only are we a safe haven for those who are ill or “possessed of demons”—including our enemies—offering them the hospitality of authentic friendship and love, but we are especially a safe haven for those who are feverish of heart—which of course includes everyone. We can be welcoming to others because, in truth, we remain sinners just as they are. Moreover, whatever we do now, without regard to any measure, is “good enough” because we trust in Christ to see us through death itself—though we hardly give that goodness a second thought. But when we are tempted, we are reminded that whatever we do, being “possessed” by Christ, is not our doing but Christ's.

A concluding postscript: If there is a similarity between Darwin's struggle for existence and our fevered struggle against non-existence, to which faith in Christ is God's final answer, is the love so engendered in us anti-Darwinian or quintessential

Darwinian? Is christic love the key to humanity's continued existence (thus Darwinian), or does it risk our existence for one that is promised in Christ (thus anti-Darwinian)? What say you?