

Sunday Sermon
February 4, 2018
“Not in Ways We Expect”
Isaiah 40:27-31
Mark 1:29-39

Introduction

Every year for the Super Bowl, my husband’s family participates in a score guessing game. There is no betting; there is no prize. We just submit scores to see who can come closest at guessing the margin of victory for the winning team.

We have played this game for almost 20 years, some years with as many as 40 participants. It is, one sister-in-law says, our way of staying connected and engaged through one of the things the family does best, cut-throat competition.

What is really interesting is who has won at this game. We have one nephew who was an associate editor for *Pro Football Weekly*. He has blogged and been interviewed on sports shows as a pro-football expert. But he has never won. Some of his siblings have won, but he has never been the winner.

We have family members who played high school and college football. They have not won. In fact, more females have won the competition than males. Our daughter, a college professor of social work who cares little about professional football, is the contest’s only three-time winner. Perhaps it is because she teaches statistics?

Over the years I have tried various tactics for my picks, all unsuccessful. I have studied teams’ scoring patterns and their season averages. I have calculated an average of the winning and losing scores in Super Bowl history. I have studied the colors of winning and losing teams to look for a pattern. I have even compared team mascots and their relative strengths.

One year I submitted the chapter and first verse of the text for my sermon that day. Believe it or not, I only missed the final score that year by one point. Yet I did not win, because it was not the correct point spread. Sometimes winning does not come in ways we expect.

I

The Bible gives us lots of stories about Jesus healing, miraculous stories. Yet the one we heard today is not all that spectacular. There are no dramatic gestures or words. There is no rebuke of an evil spirit.

Jesus just goes to Simon’s mother-in-law who is sick with a fever, offers his hand, and lifts her up. It is very simple, very domestic, very ordinary. Will Willimon says when you think about it, this scene is repeated a thousand times every day in hospitals and skilled care centers. Yet, just because it happens every

day, he says, the scene is no less wondrous. Because anytime in this world someone reaches out to someone else in pain or need, touches them and lifts them up, it is nothing short of miraculous.

We can do that, you know, you and I. In fact, Jesus calls us to do just that. We may not feel that we are very good at reaching out to care for others, that we do not know the right things to say or do. Yet just our being there is a way of taking someone by the hand and lifting them up. All of the healing that goes on in God's world is not spectacular, miraculous work done by those who are especially gifted, unusually equipped. A lot is done by ordinary people like you and me.

II

Think back over your own life at the times when you have been the beneficiary of a "healing touch." Those times when you have been lifted up, restored through the good efforts of somebody who cared enough to share an expression of care and share God's love with you.

When I was informed that our second child would have profound disabilities, the result of a genetic mutation, the individuals from whom I received care were unlikely sources. They were not colleagues in ministry who offered wise words of counsel, but rather a church member who called regularly just to say, "How did today go?" And my mother who simply said, "He may have problems but he's alive, and I'm buying him an Easter outfit."

Twelve years later on the day when we moved that son out of our home to institutional care, a colleague called and simply said, "Sometimes life stinks." That is all he said; he did not have to say anything else.

When I had been serving as a campus minister at The Citadel and then was shut out of ministry because of the debate over the admission of women, the Catholic priest came to my office one day. He did not say a word; he just sat there with me in the quietness. It was enough.

When my father died in the middle of the night, I was over an hour away from his house. The man who came to pick up his body for the funeral home called, "Preacher," he said, "I'm gonna wait until you get here so you can see him before we go."

Simple, symbolic gestures. Yet, I experienced them as more effective than fluent, articulate prayers or well-phrased speeches or carefully chosen scripture. They were enough. Mark shows us that some of the most powerful sermons Jesus ever preached are those in which he hardly spoke a word.

III

What Mark shows us in this narrative of twenty-four hours is a miniature sketch of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus leaves the synagogue at Capernaum. He

goes to the home of Simon and Andrew. He heals Simon's mother-in-law. Then when at sundown when Sabbath is over, he faces a crowd who has gathered.

He has said he has come to preach the kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice and righteousness. But with so many hurting people, he cannot get a chance to preach. So instead he reaches out and touches the people in their pain and need. The next morning he goes by himself for prayer. The disciples pursue and find him, saying, "Everyone is looking for you." Jesus says, "Let's go on to the next town to proclaim the message there."

It is a hectic itinerary. But maybe that is why Mark gives it to us, to show us how in the overwhelming demands of this world Jesus stops and reaches out to people in simple gestures, one at a time.

Not a word is recorded of what Jesus says to Simon's mother-in-law, or to Simon or to Andrew or to anyone in the crowd. Just that he reaches out to the people, offers his hand and lifts them up. It is very simple, very domestic, very ordinary. And yet miraculous.

Conclusion

"Everyone is looking for you," the disciples tell him. Yes, we all are looking for Jesus. We all want healing. And Jesus comes, into our house, into our life, takes us by the hand and lifts us. But the healing and wholeness do not always come in the ways we expect.

We have heard how youth in a Presbyterian church in Columbia, SC, did a simple, yet miraculous thing. They took a time when people come together for football and fun and brought people together for a greater good. They started collecting dollars and food for those in need. Now this year, 28 years later, people of all faiths will report millions of dollars and millions of pounds of food collected and donated to local charities.

Success and winning do not always come as we expect. Those who really win are not the ones who put their energies into having the best score but rather the ones who put their efforts into serving others.

Mark says when Simon's mother-in-law was healed, she immediately got up and began to serve others. We can do that too, you know, each one of us who has experienced the touch of Jesus through others. It is, in fact, what Jesus calls us to do.

Ordinary people like you and me, doing simple, ordinary things. And yet the effect, well, it can be downright miraculous.