

**Finding Healing**  
**Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**By Pastor Albert Triolo**

**The Gospel according to Mark, 1:21-28.**

<sup>21</sup>[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup>They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup>Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup>and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” <sup>25</sup>But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” <sup>26</sup>And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup>They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” <sup>28</sup>At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

**The Sermon**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I had several conversations and emails this past week that are all in some way related. I want to lay those out, tease out a common thread, and connect it all to the Gospel.

First. In one of our Bible studies, the theme of salvation regularly comes up. It did again this week. We wonder things like: Who is saved? How can we be certain of our salvation? If works matter, how can anyone be worthy? Will people outside the church ever hear this as good news?

Second. I later received the weekly prayer communication from our Watch and Prayer ministry. It was a quote from John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. Wesley wrote,

“So that your prayer may have its full weight with God, see that you have charity toward all men. Otherwise your prayer is more likely to bring a curse than a blessing on your head. Nor can you expect to receive any blessing from God while you have not charity towards your neighbor. Therefore, let this hindrance be removed without delay. Confirm your love towards one another, and love them, not in word only, but also in deed and in truth.... This rule is a rule which many believe to be naturally engraved on the mind of everyone who comes into the world.”

Third. Then one of the regular participants in that ministry added a quote from 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon who wrote, “God, send us the Spirit by whom alone we shall be able to obey so high a rule!”

OK. So, Let’s tie these three together. *Who is saved?* Those who are in communion with Christ. *Who is in communion with Christ?* Those who are active in works of love for God and neighbor. *How can we do these works of love?* Only through the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us.

After these emails and conversations, I read a commentary by St. Augustine related to our Gospel reading. And this is where it connects. His comments connected everything I just said to the Gospel reading for today. He said,

“Call to mind with me the time when Peter was praised and called blessed. Was it because he merely said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’? No, he who pronounced him blessed regarded not merely the sound of his words, but the affections of his heart. Compare that with the words of the demons who said almost the same thing: ‘We know who you are, the Son of God’, just as Peter had confessed him as ‘Son of God.’ So, what is the difference? Peter spoke in love, but the demons in fear.... So, tell us how faith is to be defined, if even the devils can believe and tremble? *Only the faith that works by love is faith.*”

In response to some of these conversations, another member offered his summary. I think he captured it pretty well. He wrote: “The central condition for participation in the salvation proclaimed in the New Testament is faith in Christ, where faith is an active faith, one that includes both mind and heart.” We might say that faith is about loving God with all of our + [making the sign of the cross], mind, all our heart, and all our strength.

At the root of much of our theological wrestling is a fundamental misunderstanding of salvation. During St. Augustine’s time (in the 4<sup>th</sup> century), it went without saying that what we are talking about is relationship. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, salvation shifted from relational to judicial.

Twenty years ago, when I was still a new pastor, a seasoned pastor who was well respected in the synod told me that he no longer accepted Penal Substitutionary Atonement. Don’t let those words scare you. This is not going to be a thirty-minute theological exploration. It is fairly simple to explain. And it’s also not going to sound very strange or foreign. In short, it is the theology that our sin makes God angry and that Jesus takes away the punishment we deserve. So, you might wonder what was it that the pastor was rejecting twenty years ago. I wondered the same thing until I began my doctoral work at Luther Seminary about eight years ago.

The theory of Penal Substitutionary Atonement was developed by Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century. In Anselm’s paradigm, God is holy and can have no part of sin. Humanity’s sin wounds God’s divine honor. Because God is just, God’s honor needs to be satisfied. The focus becomes what we must do to appease God. For Roman Catholic Christians, this ultimately went the way of indulgences and the purchasing of the merits of the saints. For Protestant Christians who knew Rome was wrong, Christ became the only one who could merit our salvation, who could make that purchase on our behalf. It is He who paid the price for us. In either case, the focus is on changing who? God. This is what the pastor was rejecting twenty years ago. He was rejecting the idea that God is the one who needs to be changed.

Before Anselm, the church’s understanding of atonement certainly included Christ’s death on the cross. Without it, no one would be saved. But before Anselm, Christ did not offer His death to God as a payment. Rather, Christ gave it to death itself. St. Athanasius said in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, “The ransom was offered to death on behalf of all so that by it He once more opened the way to the heavens.” We die because of sin. Christ took on our sin and He died on the cross. He defeated death. Christ defeated death with His death so that everyone might live. It is not about satisfying an angry God. IT IS ABOUT BRINGING HEALING TO US! It is not God who is changed; it is *we* who are changed. It is not God who is appeased; but *we* who are transformed. We are the ones being made ready for the presence of God. God is love and already awaits us.

Sin is an illness of the heart that brings death by cutting off communion with the one who is life. God doesn’t cut off that communion. After Adam and Eve’s sin in Genesis, it was not God who avoided them. It was they who dove into the bushes. It is *we* who cut off communion with God.

Christ defeats death so that we might no longer be slaves to our fear of death. We are free to live in communion with Him. God is not an angry god who needs to be appeased. God is love; it is *we* who need to be healed. So, let's stop trying to pay for our sins—whether through our efforts, the merits of the saints, or whatever it might be—and start being healed through the medicine Christ offers.

What is that medicine? Well, Lent is coming. Maybe we can start there. We will begin Ash Wednesday with the reminder that Lent is a season for increased prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. If you want to find the spiritual healing that is salvation, start there. Increase your time in communion with God through prayer. Identify the passions in your life that draw you from Christ and fast from them. Give of your time, talent, and treasure to care for those in need. Christ tells us in Matthew that when we care for those in need, we care for Him. We read that not too many weeks ago.

Even the demons know who Christ is. If we want salvation, what we need is the healing that comes only through communion with the one who is life. So, come to the font. Come to the table. Come to confession. Enjoy the full sacramental life of the Church. Go into the world and see Christ in your neighbor. Love them as you love yourself. Do this not on your own but through the power of the Holy Spirit who is working in and through you. If we want healing, that's where we find it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.