

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost 2015  
The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett  
St. James' Church. Mt. Airy MD

Not only do we have two healing miracles in today's gospel lesson, the stories are actually nested one within the other. Jesus is on his way to help one person in need when he gets interrupted by another one.

And these are the last two of a group of three healing miracles in Mark's gospel.

Immediately before today's lesson is not the story of the calming of the sea that we heard last Sunday, but the tale of the Gerasene demoniac, a man so troubled by unclean spirits that he is untameably wild, living among the tombs with broken chains on his wrists and ankles, until Jesus casts the legion of unclean spirits into a herd of swine, who drown themselves. So there are four miracle stories in a row, one deed of power (the calming of the sea) and three healings.

And one of the themes that unites these four stories is faith: the faithlessness of the disciples that makes them afraid on the stormy seas is contrasted with the faith of Jairus and his wife, and with the hemorrhagic woman, whose faith, Jesus says, has made her whole.

And indeed, that faith is also contrasted with the faithlessness of Jesus' hometown in the next part of Mark's gospel, which is next Sunday's reading, faithlessness so great that Jesus can do no healing in that place.

So we could conclude that the point Mark is making with these stories is about faith and healing, and we could stop here and have some healing prayers and be done for the day if it weren't for one thing: that story of the man possessed by the legion of unclean spirits doesn't quite fit in. It is not faith that draws the man to Jesus, or at least nothing is said of it, and Jesus' conversation is with the unclean spirits themselves – surely their faith is not the issue.

But that one story, set amid all these illustrations of faith, points out another theme that runs through this whole suite of stories that we might not otherwise notice, a theme which might, in fact, have been deliberately hidden by the gospel writer. For what all of these stories have in common is a serious challenge to the purity codes that governed the lives of Jesus' community. The spirits possessing the demoniac man are not the only unclean things in this story.

The biblical purity codes forbid touching someone who is bleeding, touching the bodies of the dead, forbid a man talking to a woman outside his family. And then there are all of those pigs! According to the purity code, Jesus has made himself unclean by many of his actions.

The hidden message here is that the purity codes – the set of rules that govern daily life among people who have faith in God, that define the boundaries of their community, of who's in and who's out; who may enter the temple and make the required sacrifices; who may be spoken to and who may be heard; who may be

embraced and who must be shunned – these rules that define and strengthen the community of faith are actually standing between these people and the grace they need. These rules are standing between them and God.

The faith that makes them whole is, in the end, the faith to step over those boundaries, to touch someone they may not touch, to speak to someone they are obligated to shun, to step beyond the boundaries that make their community strong, in order to receive the gifts that God is offering them.

What a hard step this is for them – a desperate act. Jairus and his wife and the hemorrhagic woman have tried everything within the bounds of their community and its rules, and see the touch of a stranger as their last hope. Even if it breaks all the rules of their community, they are willing, in their desperation, to cross that line.

It is because of these stories and others like them, because of this strong challenge to the biblical purity code, that we no longer bind ourselves to this complicated set of rules and rituals, even though they are right there in the Bible. We eat bacon and crab cakes; we go to church with Band-Aids on, or with blotchy skin; we shake the hand of strangers; we speak to people of the opposite sex; we wear cotton-polyester blends. We do not believe that adherence to the rules laid out in the first five books of the Bible is necessary in order to follow God and live in community.

Which doesn't mean we don't have purity codes. It doesn't mean that there aren't behaviors which may, for instance, be fine for other people, but "in our family we don't do that." Or that there aren't ways we define and reinforce who is in and who is out, who gets to sit with the cool kids, who you can socialize with that will make sure you get ignored or bullied by others, what kinds of behaviors, or modes of dress, or personal habits, or topics of conversation that will cause others to close the circle and leave you on the outside. Or what gender or skin color or accent or life partner will keep you out of the social network of the successful and powerful in your profession, community or family.

We make decisions about who we will befriend, from whom we will accept hospitality, who we will talk to and who we will listen to based on complicated social codes of who's in and who's out, who are "our kind of people," who make us uncomfortable, and who are accepted or shunned by others whose acceptance we seek or seek to preserve. Our purity codes, although seldom written down, are just as complex as those in the Bible.

But the healing miracles of Jesus challenge our modern personal and community purity codes just as much as they challenged the biblical purity code of Jesus' community. God's grace, Jesus teaches us, requires us to step over the boundaries that separate us from strangers and outsiders. God's love not only permits but compels us to embrace the stranger, to welcome those who make us

uncomfortable, to acknowledge and celebrate the humanity we share with those who seem most different from us.

We are not called to replace the old purity code with a new, improved one that puts those who ought to be outsiders on the outside. We are called to imagine, embrace, and strive for a community with no outsiders, a city of God whose borders are not vast, but nonexistent.

And when we achieve that all-embracing community where no one is a stranger and no one is an outsider, but all are known and all are welcomed, then we will be able to say that our faith has made us whole.

Amen.