



Sunday February 7, 2021

Pastor Tony Acompnado

Mark 1:29-39 (Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany)

The stage is set for another thrilling match-up. All the players have prepared well, and no expense has been spared in terms of the time and effort that's been put into getting ready for this big day. The stakes are high, the competition is sure to be fierce, and the whole world will be watching. But no, I'm not talking about the Super Bowl – I'm referring to the Super Bowl commercials!

And although I've heard that several long-standing companies will sit this year out, foregoing the \$5.5 million dollar investment due to financial impacts shaped by the pandemic, there will nevertheless be plenty of commercials highlighted during tonight's Super Bowl. But I have to admit, as much as I like the funny, endearing, and clever commercials featuring puppies, Clydesdales, and some of my favorite snack foods – none of them seems to impact me the way a certain commercial has from a few years back.

During the 2018 Super Bowl, there was a Nike commercial featuring a diverse collection of female athletes engaging in their various endeavors. Despite all the odds they faced and the opposition against them and their success – they never let their hard work or determination go to waste and they refused to give up or be defeated. The commercial closes with a young ice skater stepping onto the ice and then ends with the words, "Believe *in More.*"

I just love that commercial and I think it's so amazing because it highlights a sense of possibility, potential, empowerment, and freedom. And I think many of us tend to find inspiration in these kinds of examples because deep down inside we find them motivational or hope that they might even be a reflection of our own story.

But as much as I love that commercial, I'd like to think that we might also get that feeling in places other than commercials with creative marketing, trying to influence us to purchase their products. Like at home from supportive parents or a loving partner, at work from good colleagues, on the athletic field from coaches or teammates, or in school from caring teachers and friends – and maybe even at church. It makes me wonder – *do we get that feeling from church?* Because it certainly is part of the gospel.

Last week we saw Jesus' first action in Mark's gospel was to cast out an unclean spirit and we interpreted that as God's commitment to stand against all the powers that seek to keep us from the abundant and full life that God promises. And this week, that same pattern continues when Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law, restoring her to both her community and her vocation. But it's not only this one woman; in fact, it's all kinds of people – as Jesus heals, and cares, and restores countless people – setting them free from illness and possession, to be the people God created them to be. So many people are set free, according to Mark, that the toll it takes on Jesus forces him to retreat for a time of silence and prayer. However, a short time later he feels restored, or perhaps it's because he senses the profound need around him, and he goes once again to embrace the mission entrusted to him – to heal and feed and care for and set free.

Of course, this isn't just the message of the first chapter of Mark either, because it consumes Mark's entire account and the other gospels as well – and most certainly *all* of Scripture. God desires to set all of us free so that we might live into our God given identity and potential, and in turn claim our calling as children of God joining God in the mission to love and bless the world.

The twenty-four hours described in today's gospel reading represents the ministry of Jesus in a nutshell – preaching the Good News of God and healing God's people – and it represents the ministry of those who follow him just the same.



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The grace of God is being revealed through the ministry of Jesus, but that grace has two sides, and both sides involve change. Seeing only what you and I are accustomed to see, judging our reality by our culture, ordering our lives by economic class and religious definitions – we find change costly on so many levels – and we take comfort in the physical, mental, and spiritual status quo. Yet Jesus is telling us that change is required; necessary even, and it will be both uncomfortable and blessed – but through it, we'll come to experience a new reality. So, while we seek out God, our motives in seeking God are mixed, because we want gain without loss; we want self-definition, and we want control.

In today's gospel Jesus frees Simon's mother-in-law *from* illness and he frees crowds of people *from* disease and possession as well. There's a freedom that our life in Christ reveals, but it's tilted *from* the many things that hold us back - freedom *from* the bondage of sin and death, but also *from* the things like fear, loss, despair, insecurity and everything else that prevents us from living the full life God intends for us.

And sometimes I don't think we remember or confidently move to another important dimension of the gospel – that the gospel freedom Jesus promises not only frees us *from* those things that seek to oppress us, but it also frees us *for* a life of purpose, meaning, and good works. Yes, I said good works, but not those things that we do in the vain hope of justifying ourselves before God or others, but instead, those things that we do in response to God's grace to serve our neighbor out of a sense of joy, love, and freedom.

What did the man from whom the unclean spirit was cast out last week do after his healing? What did all the people Jesus healed in this week's story do once they were freed from the various ailments of mind, body, and spirit that had captivated them? I imagine that some of them were so grateful to be made well – so grateful that they had been freed from something debilitating or destructive, that they returned as quickly as possible to their old lives and routines and relationships. But some, I'm guessing, including Simon's mother-in-law, recognized that they weren't only freed *from* something, they were also freed *for* something – for lives of purpose and meaning and service and generosity and so much more.

The mother-in-law's response – her work, her diaconal work of service is a faithful announcement of the gospel. This is no woman bowing to cultural convention and keeping in her restricted place as a servant; this is a disciple who quietly demonstrates the high honor of service for those who follow Jesus. Simon's mother-in-law doesn't serve because she has to, or because she's compelled to, or because someone asks her to, or even because this is somehow "her *supposed* place." She serves because this is what discipleship looks like. She serves, showing us what following Jesus will really mean.

Brothers and sisters – what might you have been freed *from* that has been holding you back? And just as importantly, what might have you been freed *for* that will help you live more fully into God's promises for your life? How might God be calling you to live into your identity as a follower of Jesus, a believer in the truth, and a messenger of the grace, love, mercy, and hope of the Gospel? And what or who might need you to act on your calling this week? Because I want to remind you that each time you respond to the needs of the people and the world around you, you are responding to God's call and living into the freedom that is ours in Christ.

I'd like to end today with this quote from American writer and theologian Frederick Buechner, "*The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.*" My prayer is that you will claim for yourselves this gospel gift of *freedom from and freedom for* and begin living together into the people and community to which God has called us. Thanks be to God. Amen.