

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 8 FEBRUARY 2009

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Mark 1: 29-34

“Starting out in the Evening Risking Steps of Freedom”

1. Mark begins his Gospel in the first verse with a bold association: The story of Jesus is like the event of the creation of the world in the book of Genesis. “It is a story about a new heaven and new earth”. (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 122.)

2. For Mark then, the two events in our text in Mark 1: 29-34, the healing of a mother-in-law in a home and the people who came to the house for healing, are about the end-time breaking into present history, the new heaven and earth emerging in this first day of Jesus’ public ministry.

As we look at these events, we will explore the particular nature of Mark’s audacity. What are these new beginnings emerging in human history? In what way are they evident in our lives?

3. In the story about Peter’s mother-in-law, we meet Jesus and his new companions, Peter, his brother Andrew and James and John on a Sabbath day, a day when healings and even cooking meals are forbidden.

Yet, Jesus chooses to heal Peter’s mother-in-law. Then, when she offers them hospitality, as a religious leader he does not prohibit this act of gratitude. Jesus means freedom! Human need and the celebration of life have a priority over institutional rules and regulations. Grace and compassion are primary. They regulate the regulations and ensure deeper understanding of what is happening to all sectors of society.

4. Peter’s mother-in-law experiences holistic healing. Her body is healed of a fever. Added to this, her place in the social and religious body is re-defined. Her inferior social status as a woman is challenged symbolically by what Jesus does: Jesus approaches the place where she lies; he “sees” her, giving her visibility; and he held her hand, each act being forbidden for a non-family male.

“... before the time of Hillel and Jesus, women, like lepers, were relegated to the outer courts of the Temple, and women received social status only through their relationship to males -- usually their fathers or husbands; for a woman to be known through her son-in-law is so extreme as to suggest that Mark is making a special point of her social anonymity.” Marie Sabin, *Women Transformed*.

Now, I want to firmly note that new studies are telling us that such liberalisation of rigid gender patterns were also arising within the Judaism of Mark’s period (Marie Sabin). Such glimpses of a new heaven and new earth emerge regularly amongst all faiths, and cultures, which includes secular humanism.

The power of this event in this woman’s life is clearer in the Greek imagery. The Greek word Mark uses for her “lying down” is “used to describe someone who is already dead” (Marie Sabin). This image relates to more than the bodily fever, given the actions of Jesus. Illness can be a symptom of underlying causes produced by family, religious and social dynamics.

The Greek image for the word “to cure” has the meaning, “to be resurrected” (Marie Sabin). Marie Sabin writes that “the healing acts of Jesus are ... directed toward releasing, opening up, and setting free.” (Sabin) Jesus actions in our story suggest that this was more than bodily healing.

5. This woman then acts on her newly acquired place in this family and in her social, religious and cultural order. Encountering Jesus has meant global change in her life. Before this event, she was shaped and created by her family and society. Now she is freed to participate in new and different roles, creating her new personal and social identity!

6. If we look closer at Mark’s story, from various human science perspectives, we can discern key dynamics and elements that are the seeds in the ground of her change: of being noticed, of actual respectful contact, of expressed compassion, of non-paternalistic understanding, of encouragement, and of belonging in community. From this ground, Jesus raises this mother-in-law into an invitation to new forms of life.

This invitation has new challenges. Freud suggested “the desire, fear and hate that we feel towards parents and siblings in childhood [most of which are unconscious and unprocessed] is displaced and put onto others throughout life... [and] that sorting out the projected fantasies from social relations is a key task for the self-reflective individual”. (Anthony Elliot, *Concepts of Self*, 64.) Grace and compassion received can empower one’s journey into such tasks of self-and-Other reflection.

7. The second part of our story has its own subtleties. Peter’s home is an extended family of professional fishing people. Tradespeople were like our middle class. Jesus invites freedom “to live out its life” in this community. For Mark and his readers around and after 65BCE, this probably reflected the Jewish Christian community.

Starting out in the evening, people of great need and living in poverty wearily make their way to this community. They did not start out earlier because they obeyed the rules of that society which prohibited such movement and acts of healing on the Sabbath. Oh, how religious and secular institutions can at times dictate the lives of those living in poverty! Aboriginal people I know told me that in the 1950s they had to go to church before they were given food and help.

8. For me, the words, “starting out in the evening”, is also a metaphor!

“The evening” is an image suggesting a state of weariness and even resignation due to a sense that I just don’t know what I can do in this situation; that I have come to a place in my life from which I just cannot seem to move on.

“Starting out” is an image about movement.

The picture I have of these people is that there were those among them, younger people, those less overcome by their suffering, who organised and accompanied others. Their power was their decision to make this journey and enable their friends to seek the resources and support from this community of Jesus. Their motivation was self-interest, which included the interest of others.

And so, here we have a new, surprising event: Incredibly different socio-economic communities interacting to produce healing. It was not top-down, with those with resources controlling the agenda. It was mutual. Again, this form of association was not acceptable to the rigid and social order. In addition, part of the challenge for the community of Jesus was to understand and change the causes of suffering and poverty. The healing in this encounter was similar to the healing of the woman in Peter’s house: bodily healing; psychological healing; healing related to what they needed

so as to deal with poverty and powerlessness; and in cases for those with open hearts and minds, new hope and new inclusive faith.

9. What does this story mean for us, and especially for a Uniting Church like ours where most of us are of mature years?

The movie, *Starting out in the evening*, relates the story of Leonard Schiller, played by Frank Langella. He is a 71 year-old author, similar in style to William Faulkner. He is stuck, as an author, as a person, in his life. He has not been able to write anything for 10 years. He finds himself immobilised in the “evening of his life”.

The story relates how a young 24 year-old Masters student enters his life and creates the events that enable him to start again, to begin his novel.

At one point, when she is leaving because he is terribly resistant to letting her work with him, she tells him why he has inspired her: “Your novels set me free! Growing up I always felt like an alien... in a time of uncertainty I went to books. That’s when I found you!”

What struck me was the value and unrealised power of intergenerational association. It was difficult but necessary, and in the end a freeing and life giving encounter for both a Generation Y and a person living in their later years! It did need great patience! There were fights and indiscretions! However, working together inspired and motivated both of them, and they learnt what openness and cooperation across the generations means.

10. Conclusion

We are a learning community here at St Aidan’s. We may be in our evening years but we can start out in the evening to invite the sunrise of our future. Our text offers us encouragement and hope. New beginnings are often subtle, surprising, and seemingly unnoticed. Yet, they are always emerging, all encompassing, inclusive and holistic.

The woman healed in our story today takes our story by the hand. This story meets us, touches us, tells us we are visible, worthwhile and loved, and leaves us with an invitation. Rise up and participate in life around you as a free and equal person. You do not need to give in to, or deny anxiety or family, social, or religious patterns that are unhealthy!

We are invited to start out in the evening, free to risk difference!