

ENOUGH FAITH

Does anyone here need to go to Gennesaret?

I ask that because I don't assume this sermon is for everyone.

In fact, it may not be for anyone here this morning.

My message today isn't for the confident, the brave, or those who believe they have it all together and think their lives are secure.

It's not for those who are healthy and take for granted that their good health will continue uninterrupted, well into the future.

It's not for those who think they have a claim on God and feel they deserve God's blessings in their lives.

No, this sermon is for those who need to go to Gennesaret.

Mark's story of the visit to Gennesaret by Jesus and his disciples seems like little more than an afterthought. It takes place after Jesus sent his disciples out, two-by-two, to preach and teach and heal.

When the disciples returned from their long missionary journey and reported to Jesus how things went, they were exhausted. Jesus was exhausted, too. And he suggested that they go away to some quiet, deserted place by themselves where they could get some R and R. A little vacation. A sabbatical.

Jesus and the disciples got on a boat and went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, to Gennesaret, where they hoped that they wouldn't be recognized and no demands would be made on them. But when they arrived, they were recognized. A crowd gathered to hear Jesus preach and teach, and his plans to take some time off went by the wayside.

Jesus, being who he was and knowing what God had called him to do, didn't seem to mind the disruption. In fact, rather than feeling resentful about being imposed upon, he looked at the crowd and had deep compassion for them, because they were like lost sheep who had no shepherd to watch over and care for them.

Jesus' fame had preceded him. People had heard about his reputation as a healer, so they brought their sick to him. Many sick people.

They laid them on mats in the marketplace, and Jesus did what you could call a mass healing. As he walked by, people just reached out and touched the hem of his cloak, and those who did were made well.

I think Mark intended this story to remind us of another one he wrote that I preached on just a few weeks ago. A woman approached Jesus as he was making his way to the house of Jairus, a religious leader whose daughter was very ill and close to death.

This woman had been bleeding for twelve years, and no doctor was able to help her. And she thought, "If I can just touch the hem of his garment, I will be healed."

She did touch it. And she was healed.

The story about all those people in Gennesaret who touched the edge of Jesus' cloak and were healed implies that such incidents may have been common. Jesus didn't always interact and talk with everyone he made well. Sometimes he would simply walk through a crowd without teaching or preaching at all, silent, passive, almost ghost-like, and would let people reach out, touch him, and be made new.

Now, maybe you're not all that interested in this account of Jesus healing a crowd of people. That's understandable, if you're relatively healthy and are able to live a full and active life. If that's the case, you don't really need to think about reaching out and touching the hem of Jesus' cloak to be made well.

Or if we have health issues and need healing, we know where to go. We make an appointment with our primary care physician and he or she pokes and probes us and takes a lot of blood out of us and probably refers us to a specialist; and the specialist recommends that we have a CAT scan or some other test, and we have surgery or we're given a prescription for the latest, most powerful antibiotic.

And should the diagnosis we receive be serious, or possibly fatal, we don't resign ourselves to death right away. We're not going to give up without a fight. There must be something else that can be done: some other test we can have or some other treatment we can be given. We trust medical science to find the answer to our health problem.

When it comes to being made well, going to a health professional makes more sense to us than some sick people in Gennesaret reaching out and touching the hem of Jesus' cloak.

And yet, this story of healing in Mark's Gospel can still speak to us and be relevant to us in 2021, because, ultimately, we all need to be healed of something.

For some of us, that something is physical: Parkinson's disease, MS, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, cancer or other sicknesses of the body. Those are the kinds of illnesses we tend to think about when we read this story about people touching Jesus and being healed.

But there are some sicknesses that don't show up on an x-ray or a blood test, and don't respond to the latest drug. There are sicknesses of the spirit, ailments of the soul that are as deadly as the most aggressive kind of cancer.

Some people, for example, need to be healed of their selfishness, or their greed, or their indifference to the poor and destitute around them. Is there a treatment for that kind of sickness at the Maine Medical Center?

Not likely.

There are people who are paralyzed . . . paralyzed by guilt or shame about things they did that they regret. They can't erase what happened in the past, and it's eating away at them. They're unable to move on with their lives. Their paralysis needs to be healed, but physical therapy sessions aren't the answer.

There are people who are so afraid of dying that they're afraid to live. Maybe a prescription for anti-anxiety pills would help them feel better, but at best it only treats the symptoms of their fear, not the root cause of it.

There are people whose prejudices and hatred run so deep that they become stunted little caricatures of human beings. What's the cure for that?

There are people who aren't able to love others because they've been deeply hurt or abused. They aren't able to love their family, they aren't able to love their friends, they aren't able to love their neighbor as Jesus taught. They can't even love God. So they become like turtles, retreating into their shells, isolated, alone and lonely. Will touching Jesus' cloak draw them out?

Most of us need to be healed of something. There's some part of our life that's broken and needs to be made whole.

But can Jesus make a difference?

I imagine the people in Gennesaret who had gathered where they thought Jesus would be passing by had the same kind of questions and the same kind of doubts.

Am I in the right spot? Will he come by here? Maybe he'll be too far away from me to reach. Will touching his cloak even help?

But in spite of their questions, their doubts and their skepticism, they took a leap of faith. As Jesus went by them, they reached out and touched his robe. And they were healed.

It's important to understand that having faith in Jesus doesn't need to be all or nothing. It's not a matter of either believing in him 100% or not believing in him at all.

Because for most people, faith doesn't come all at once, fully formed. Rather, it's built up little by little, day by day, step by step. And the more acts of faith we take despite our doubts, the stronger our faith will become and the less doubts we will have.

Do you remember the Gospel story where Jesus asked a man who wanted him to heal his son if he believed, and the man responded, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."

It's okay to believe, but still have doubts. Jesus knows that faith isn't easy. That's why he said that if we only have faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, miracles can happen.

But if you want to know how much faith in Christ you need to have to be healed, I suggest that you only need enough to go to Gennesaret.

You only need enough faith to put yourself in a place where Jesus is likely to pass by. A place like this sanctuary, for example.

Then you need enough faith to wait with an open mind, and pray with an open heart, for Jesus to walk by.

When he does, he may not say anything profound to you. He may not say anything to you at all. And that's okay.

Because it's not necessary for him to talk. All that's necessary is to have enough faith for you to just reach out your hand and brush your fingers against the hem of his cloak.

Then, see what happens.

So, does anyone here need to go to Gennesaret? Amen.