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St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

Year B, Proper 10
Amos 7:7-15
Psalm 85:7-13
Ephesians 1:1-14
Mark 6:7-13

Jesus sent the disciples out and they "anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them."¹

This week, the Thursday healing Masses at St. Mary's returned and I was happy to have been scheduled as the celebrant. We blessed new oil as it's been about 16 months since the last time we were able to offer anointing on a Thursday.

The appointed gospel reading was a passage from Matthew that parallels what we just heard in Mark.² It's similar, though there are a few differences. One, in particular, stands out to me.

In Matthew, Jesus begins by telling the disciples to go to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and preach that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand," followed by his instruction to "heal the sick."³ There are sheep that are lost, but they don't have to be. They can be healed because the kingdom is at hand.

Many come here on Thursdays with physical healing in mind. I do too sometimes. But, I often tend to think of it more along the lines of spiritual healing in the sense of helping us get back on track from whatever way we have wandered off the path.

In the context of the Thursday Mass, the anointing with oil happens in lieu of the prayers of the people and the confession. This makes some sense to me, as the anointing is both a prayer and also can serve as preparation for returning to Christ in the sacrament.

I came to thinking about it this way outside the context of the Mass, doing chaplaincy work at Mt. Sinai Hospital, where, frankly, most anointing tends to happen when there isn't much left to do physically.

¹ Mark 6:7-13.

² Matthew 10:7-15.

³ Matthew 10:6-8.

I found that there was still plenty of healing that could be done for many of these patients on a deeper level.

A hospital is different from a parish in many ways. Obviously. I was reminded of one difference recently when speaking with a seminarian.

Many of the seminarians at General Seminary, where I teach and help to manage the chapel, are in chaplaincy internships right now. It's a formal program, independent from the church, though most if not all bishops require it for ordination (as do many other denominations and faith traditions). Most complete the requirement in an intensive hospital program over the summer.

This seminarian was a little discouraged because many of the patients weren't interested in talking.

It made me think about how, in the parish, parishioners that want to be anointed during the Mass come forward. If somebody wants to talk, they come up to me after Mass or send me an email.

In the hospital, the request for a chaplain doesn't always initiate with the patient. The doctor or nurse or social worker often suggests patients to the chaplain. They usually have a good sense of who needs it. Sometimes the chaplain hears about a patient that just received difficult news and so they stop by.

Some patients say no. And, that's ok. Most of the time, I found the system to work rather well.

But, it's usually more challenging for the seminarians in these internships. They're there for only a couple of months and often aren't really well integrated into the healthcare team. By the time they are, the summer is over.

It can end up being a lot of going door-to-door and trying to talk to patients. A lot of the patients will just say, "Get out!"

Some will talk to the chaplain intern. Others will talk for a little bit, change their mind, and then say, "Get out!"

While there isn't a need for chaplain interns to shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against the patients that reject them, they do need to learn to get back up, dust themselves off, and move on.

It's understandable how a seminarian might feel a bit disheartened, but we all need to remember that even Jesus was rejected.

If we look at the verses in Mark that come just before the portion we read, which was also the gospel passage from last Sunday, Jesus goes into his home country. Many reject him as being just the son of the carpenter.⁴

In part, that's why Jesus is preparing his disciples for some rejection. Not everyone will listen to them. It shouldn't be that much of a surprise, though, if not everyone even listened to Jesus.

There is also a bigger picture message here than just the potential for both success as well as failure. Jesus is telling the disciples that their work will parallel what they have been observing in his own ministry, not limited to, but certainly including some rejection. The point is that they are following Jesus.

Jesus is sending them and us on a journey, though the Greek word *ὁδός* that was translated as "journey" in today's gospel can also simply indicate a "road." Sometimes it is used to describe a "way of life."⁵

Earlier, John the Baptist said to "prepare the way of the Lord."⁶ A few chapters later in Mark, some will come to Jesus and ask him to teach them "the way of God."⁷

It's not surprising that early Christians applied this Greek word to themselves, describing their movement of following Jesus as "the Way."⁸

And, Jesus is telling them that by following him, they have everything that they need for "the Way." There's no need for a second tunic. They don't need bread or money because they'll be relying on the hospitality of others.⁹ It underscores how this is going to be about personal relationships. They will be working closely with others.

⁴ Mark 6:1-6.

⁵ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 691-692.

⁶ Mark 1:3.

⁷ Mark 12:14.

⁸ Acts 9:2, 24:14.

⁹ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Mark*, Vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 191.

“The Way” may seem a lot different these days than the early missionary work of the disciples, but it’s helpful to remember these simple origins for however Jesus is calling us to serve him.

Usually, by the end of the internship, most of the seminarians are able to look at their time in the hospital and, despite some rejection, they can think back on the summer and see many of the encounters with patients as having been meaningful.

God was present there with them, the patient, and maybe a family member. They weren’t alone on the journey.

As Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”¹⁰

And that is when healing can take place.

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

¹⁰ Matthew 18:20.