

Reflection on the Gospel-5th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 1:21-28)

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In the Mediterranean world of the first century, sickness was attributed to social rather than physical causes. The corollary of this was that healing focussed principally on restoration of the person to her or his place or status in the society or community rather than on the person's bodily affliction or dysfunction. In a very real sense, the healing of an individual brought not only the person but the community itself to wholeness.

Last Sunday, we reflected on the "healing" of a man with an "unclean spirit". Jesus, healer and teacher, expelled the unclean spirit and thus restored health to the man and to the worshipping community. The healing took place in the Capernaum synagogue on the Sabbath. This story began Mark's account of a typical day in Jesus' ministry. Today's gospel passage continues that account. Jesus leaves the synagogue and moves, in the company of two of his new disciples, to the house of Simon and Andrew. In other words, he shifts from a long established gathering place for God's people, the synagogue, to a prospective new locus of communal engagement, the house church. This new locus does not preclude the older locus: Jesus continues to teach and heal in the synagogues throughout Galilee.

In this new place of encounter with God, Jesus heals a woman with a "fever" who is identified only in relation to her son-in-law, Simon. Jesus takes her by the hand and raises her up. She is the first human character in the Markan gospel story who is said to "minister". In other words, the love of God working through Jesus draws her beyond herself to engage in a ministry of leadership in the community of God's people. A little earlier in Mark's gospel we heard that angels "ministered" to Jesus in the desert. In other words, God looked after Jesus as he embarked on his mission of bringing God's love into a broken world. Later in the gospel, Jesus insists that he came "not to be served but to serve/minister" (10:45). This woman is caught up in the same mission of bringing the community to health and wholeness.

That same evening, Simon's house becomes a magnet for "the whole city". Jesus heals their sick and afflicted and, early in the morning, he seeks the solitude of a "desert" place for prayer. The disciples seek him out, as everyone is looking for him. Jesus makes it clear to them that he must move on and bring God's word and healing beyond the city to the neighbouring Galilean towns. The message is for us as well as for those early disciples. Amid all the demands of a sometimes frenetic program, we too must search out the solitude of a "desert" place for prayer, and engage with renewed energy and insight in whatever the new day brings.