

When we read and listen to Sacred Scripture, it's often easy to miss the point of the passage being read. We pay attention to the obvious, to the literal understanding; but there's always something more going on – something much deeper. I'd like to take today's gospel, and focus our attention on the deeper meaning.

In the first paragraph, we have the healing of Peter's mother-in-law: "Jesus approached, grasped her hand, helped her up; the fever left her, and she waited on them." Now, some woman might comment: so what's new? A bunch of men come home, there's no lunch waiting for them, so, instead of fixing a sandwich for themselves, they have Jesus cure the woman, so she can wait on them. What Mark is really saying here is that, once touched by Jesus, one immediately becomes a disciple, and has no choice but to serve others: the fever leaves and service begins. Mark's message is not about chauvinism, but about discipleship. The question is: have we been touched by Jesus? If we have, how are we serving others?

In the second paragraph, Mark says that "he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him." The *demons* knew him, others did not. And Jesus didn't want that to get around – just yet. He didn't want to become a celebrity; he calls *followers* to himself, as he had called Peter and Andrew, James and John; he doesn't want fans. Fans scream and make a bit to do, until the next idol comes along, but followers take up the cross. In effect, Mark is asking us: what are we – devoted followers or finicky fans?

In the third paragraph, Mark says that Jesus rose very early, before dawn, “he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed.” Jesus needed time out; he needed time to think about and clarify, for himself, who he was, to discover his mission, what it demanded, where it was taking him. He needed to resist the fans and the growing fame, to follow something deeper. Mark is saying that it takes some quiet time, some prayer time, to find our true home, to grasp our own identity and our mission in life. He is asking: do we know where home is?

And, laced through all these events is the motif of healing, and the realization that there’s a difference between healing and curing. Ram Dass, an American spiritual teacher in the Hindu tradition suffered a debilitating stroke in 1997, and he makes the distinction well; he says: “While *cures* aim at returning our bodies to what they were in the past, *healing* uses what is present to move us more deeply to *Soul Awareness*;” he goes on: “although I have not been cured of the effects of my stroke, I have certainly undergone profound healings of mind and heart.” Healing refers to the soul, curing to the body. Healing can happen without curing.

One of my high school classmates – Alan Witte is his name – is the best example of this I can think of. He died last November of ALS, often called Lou Gehrig’s Disease. As I think most people know, ALS is a progressive degenerative disease that affects the nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord, and then the muscles throughout the body; it eventually causes paralysis and finally death.

Originally from Beloit, Al spent most of his adult life in California. I hadn't kept in touch with him, until October 6, 2006. I got a call from another classmate, Arnie. He and Al and I got together for dinner at the Buckhorn. Al had driven across the country, by himself. He was using a walker and knew very well the direction his illness would take. They wanted me to plan our 50th high school reunion, which would be in 2010. After our dinner, Al went back to California; Arnie went back to Madison; I contacted a couple other classmates, and we began planning the reunion, locating and inviting others to become involved. We had the reunion in 2010. Al was there, then in a motorized wheelchair – the only way he could get around, as his illness continued to take its toll. His speech was very slow and deliberate, as each word took great effort to form and be spoken.

But to get to the point of my telling you this: About a year before Al died, Arnie went out to visit him; and after the visit, made this entry in his journal, which he recently shared with all of us; he wrote: “Alan lives on the broad, flat part of a razor blade, but never far from the sharp, deadly edge. How could it be otherwise? His body is consistent only in its ability to find new ways to fail him. What worked last time might not work now. Or next time. That fact alone would put your mind on edge, wouldn't it? Teetering tottering. Heltering skeltering. At any moment, I might slip on the edge, slip off the earth. Now let me see if I can get some toothpaste on this brush. Try...to...raise...my...arm...enough...to...get...these shorts...into...the...washing...machine. What joy and peace he has, is hard won, against this background, hard hard won, riding down the razor. I just spent 13 days with him and I can tell you Alan has joy and peace. He has affability, charm, warmth. . . . He is a trickster, often concealing his current level of tongue-in-

cheek, keeping me guessing. ‘Arnie, would you empty those cases of Ensure and put them in the frig. Chocolates go on the second shelf down, on the left, Strawberries third shelf right, Vanillas left. Have you got that? I’m spelling it all out for you because someone as disorganized as you, Mr. Zinthefer, needs all the help he can get. And then would you scrub the floors and clean the toilet. Take out the trash. And don’t talk back.’ Our days together are sprinkled with this kind of talk. Because it comes from his perch on the razor, such directives come across as both utterly silly and deadly serious. Sillyserious. Serioussilly. Through them I can feel Alan fighting for his life. And every two or three days, apropos of I-don’t-know-what, ‘*I’m only kidding*’ rings out into the Santa Rosa sunlight.”

And I’d like to read the last email Al sent to his friends and classmates; typed all in caps – the only way he could communicate; I can imagine how long it took him. He wrote:

“THANK YOU FOR LOVING ME UNTIL I COULD LOVE MYSELF. THIS HAS GIVEN ME THE COURAGE TO DO GOD’S WILL FOR ME. WITH A NEW FOUND JOY; THE EXPERIENCE OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, OR THE PRESENCE OF GOD THROUGHOUT THE UNIVERSE. I MAKE APOLOGIES FOR THE DELAY IN FINDING THIS TRUTH, 67 YEARS, TO SURRENDER MY EGO TO YOUR LOVE FOR ME, AND KNOW THAT I AM WORTHY OF YOUR FRIENDSHIP. TO ALL, I SAY ‘GOOD-BYE WITH A LITTLE BIT OF HELLO’ – THE LIGHT OF LOVE LIVES ON. AS I PREPARE TO PASS, I DO SO UNAFRAID, HAPPY, JOYOUS AND FREE. SO, LOOK OUT YOUR WINDOWS WHEN YOU HEAR THE FAT LADY SING. PUT THE SONG IN YOUR HEART. IT CAME FROM ME. LOVE IS GOD, AND I HAVE FOUND WHAT I’VE BEEN LOOKING FOR. ALAN.

There was no cure for Alan; but there was complete, perfect healing. This is what Jesus came to do; this is the message of Mark in today's gospel.