

### Jesus in Capernaum

by Robb McCoy

In this passage of Jesus in Capernaum, we read about two occurrences. In typical Luke fashion, these two healings are a matched pair. One is a man, the other is a woman. One is done in public. The other is done in private. It is said that Jesus teaches with authority, and now he displays his authority over the natural world as well.

In the ancient world, there is a tension that comes with healing that is hard for us to understand. As one historian put it, The question healers asked then was not “How are you feeling?” but, “How is God making you feel?” or even more bluntly, “Why is God making you feel this way.”

With no knowledge of germs, bacteria, neuroscience, or psychiatry, the explanation for how people were sick or healthy was simple. It was God’s will. Therefore, there was a tension with people who claimed to heal, because it seemed to be going against God’s will. The question persisted, is a healer working against God? One way to work around this problem was to see disease as an evil entity that occupied a person.

In this understanding, a sickness or demon holding onto someone could be seen as against God’s will. So the one casting these things out is now on the side of God - helping to restore someone to their rightful place.

In this passage Jesus casts out first a demon and then a fever, he is clearly on the side of God - removing things that should not be there.

There are many people today who still believe in demons and spirits as embodied entities. It is important to know however, that there is not one widely accepted Christian “demonology.” And there never has been. Even ancient Christian writers who understood the world in these terms did not have consensus about what demons were. There are many Biblical ways to understand demons and spirits. It is also possible to see all of this as metaphor - or as language that is helpful when things seem too big to overcome.

I believe that most ailments, physical and mental, can be explained without any type of demonology. Yet there are times when depression can feel like an external weight holding me down, or there are actual chains

*This octagonal meeting place dates to the 4th Century in Capernaum, but further excavations reveal that it was built on top of a home, which tradition holds was Simon Peter’s.*



keeping me from living fully. I can understand people whose trauma from the past lingers and whispers negativity and dis-ease into their consciousness for years. Addiction can grip someone with an almost supernatural power. We all fight “demons.”

There are spiritual forces of wickedness (as our baptism rites say) that grip society which we must resist. There is overwhelming evil that we may name Christian Nationalism, racism, homophobia, consumerism, or greed. These things feel like they have authority in our world, but the good news is that Jesus can free us from all of these demons. He can cast out this evil.

When Jesus cast out the fever from Peter’s mother-in-law, she served them. In the greek, she did “diakonia.” This is the root of our word deacon. It can also be translated to ministry. Peter’s mother-in-law ministered to Jesus. This, my friends, is our calling is those who know Christ. Ministry is the calling of the baptized, it is not the privilege of the ordained.

We are all ministers. We who have been healed are best equipped to heal. We minister to each other as we heal from our wounds. The people of Nazareth ran Jesus out of town after sharing his words of grace. As we continue the story, we see that the people of Capernaum have the opposite, but also incorrect, reaction. They want to keep him for their own.

Again people misunderstand his mission. “I must preach the good news of God’s kingdom in other cities too, for this is why I was sent” (4:43). Our good news is not ours to keep. It is ours to share. As ministers healed by grace, together we can resist the spiritual forces of wickedness that hold so many down.