

JESUS AND THE GUNSLINGER  
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A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church  
in Brookfield, Connecticut  
on February 4, 2024

Text: Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

In the gospel reading this morning, it's amazing how quickly Jesus' reputation spreads. He heals one woman with a fever, and the next thing you know, he's got every sick person in Capernaum knocking on his door, wanting him to cure their diseases and cast out their demons.

It reminds me of that movie, *The Shootist*, with John Wayne. I don't know if you've ever seen it. It's a western, and the main character is a guy named J. B. Books. He's a famous gunslinger. He's known far and wide. But he's getting up there in years, and his health is starting to fail. In the opening scene, he rides into Carson City, Nevada, and goes to see his old friend, Doc Hostetler, who gives him the bad news: Books is dying of cancer, and he only has six weeks to live.

So he goes to a local boarding house run by the widow Bond Rogers and rents a room under a phony name. All he wants

is to be left alone so he can die in peace. But his reputation keeps catching up with him. People in town figure out who he is, and one by one they come knocking on his door. And just like the people in gospel, who all want something from Jesus, they all want something from Books. They all want to cash in on his fame.

The owner of the local newspaper wants to publish his life story. An old girlfriend wants to marry him so she can get her hands on his money. The undertaker wants to put his body on display after he's dead and sell tickets to see it. The marshal hopes the death of such a notorious outlaw will bring in tourist dollars. And of course all the young guns want to test themselves against the legend.

There's an interesting symmetry between this character, J. B. Books, and Jesus in the reading this morning. They're like mirror images of each other. Books is a bringer of death; Jesus is a bringer of life. Books is at the end of his career; Jesus is at the beginning of his ministry. Books is running away from his past; Jesus is running toward his future.

But even more interesting than what makes them different is what makes them the same. They're both surrounded by people who want them to remain the person they've been rather than embrace the person they really are. In Capernaum, people come out of the woodwork to see a man with the power to heal, not a man who lays down his life. In Carson City, people come out of the woodwork to see a man with more than thirty notches on his belt, not a man who's filled with remorse for all the lives he's taken.

So when you think about it, both of these stories are about someone who follows his own path rather than let everyone else tell him what to do, and someone who defines his own life rather than let everyone else tell him who he ought to be. Jesus stays on the path to the cross rather than go back to Capernaum and become a full-time healer, which is what the disciples want him to do. Books stays on the path to repentance rather than take his guns down off the shelf and go out in a blaze of glory, which is what the townspeople want him to do.

It takes a lot of strength to do that. It takes a lot of strength to listen to your own voice. It's much easier to listen to the chorus of voices all around you. In fact, the only way any of us can do it, in my opinion, is if we have help—someone in our lives who supports us; someone in our lives who doesn't want anything from us; someone in our lives who cares for us unconditionally. And that's something

else Jesus and Books have in common. They both have those kinds of relationships that come with no strings attached. They both have someone in their lives who's there purely for them.

When Jesus goes missing the next morning after he heals Peter's mother-in-law, the disciples go hunting for him. And when they find him out in the middle of nowhere, praying, they're exasperated. They're like, What are you doing? All these sick people are waiting for you. There's a line around the block! But instead of giving in to the pressure and going back to Capernaum, Jesus says, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

For him, healing is not his main purpose. It's a means to an end. It's a sign of God's kingdom. It's a way of saying, God is bringing a new reality into the world, and here's what that reality is like. It's like being healed. It's like having your pain taken away. It's like being restored and made whole.

That's Jesus' real mission—announcing the kingdom—and he's out there praying because his relationship with God is what keeps him focused and grounded. It's what gives him the strength and determination to stay on the path and not get side-tracked.

Books' story is a little bit different. For him it's not about sticking to a particular calling. It's about finding redemption. And what I love about the movie is how he ends up finding redemption in the relationships he forms with two other characters.

The Shootist is a western, but it's not a typical western. It has a few action scenes, but overall it moves at a slower pace, and it's mostly about Books and Bond Rogers and how she comes to admire his poise and dignity in the face of death. It also focuses on the relationship between Books and Bond Rogers' son, Gillom. At first he idolizes Books and

wants to be just like him. But as they grow closer, he stops romanticizing violence and decides that's not the kind of life he wants after all.

In the end, these two are the only ones who don't try to use Books for their own selfish purposes, and the only ones who see the real person behind the image, and that's what finally redeems him. He finds healing in these relationships, not for his cancer but for his soul.

**S**o if you're looking for something to watch tonight, I recommend *The Shootist*. And while you're watching it, think about what J. B. Books has in common with Jesus, and what both of them have in common with us.

We all have a path in life, and we all feel pressure sometimes to abandon it. There's never a shortage of voices telling us what we ought to do. So focus on the relationships that give you the strength you need to not get side-tracked.

Most of all, focus on your relationship with God, who wants nothing from you other than for you to be your truest, most authentic self—the person God made you to be. Do what Jesus does. Carve out some time to spend with God away from everyone else, and let God be there for you. Amen.