

Sunday, February 4, 2018

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

Isaiah 40.21-31; Psalm 147.1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9.16-23; Mark 1.29-39

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Our icon for this fifth Sunday after the Epiphany is a nameless woman who is the subject of a mere two verses in Mark's Gospel. "Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told [Jesus] 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" (Mk 1.30-31).

Whenever I hear this passage, I can't help but feel sorry for Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Sure, she is healed of what is presumably some life-threatening illness. But no sooner is she healed than she is up on her feet, cooking meals and serving guests. For Christ's sake, give the poor woman a break! Let her get a little more rest before having to return to the household chores. And shame on you Jesus, Peter, Andrew, James, John, and whoever else is in the house, for letting her jump out of bed and getting right back to her household duties. For maybe even expecting her to play the dutiful hostess. Men! But maybe that's what mom's do. Simon's mother-in-law reminds me of those very few times during my childhood when my mother was sick. As soon as she was well – sometimes even before she was well – she was back doing the mom thing. Cooking, cleaning, taking care of the family.

While almost a passing reference, a mere footnote, in the life and ministry of Jesus, these two verses – the simple action of Jesus and the response of this woman – speak volumes about who God is. And who we are as God's people.

All of our readings for today speak to the underlying theme personified in Simon's mother-in-law. On this fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, we look at yet one more way that God is revealed to us. Through liberation.

Our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah delivers a prophecy to God's people who are in exile in Babylon. It is a poetic reminder of the incomparable greatness and goodness of God. These words exemplify the power of God to bring hope and life out of despair and death. These words are a fervent expression of hope for liberation from exile. Not just an expression of hope. They are also a promise that liberation will be theirs. "He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless . . . those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles" (Is 40.29, 31). What a beautiful image of liberation – to go from being in chains to soaring on the winds like a mighty eagle.

Today's Psalm expands on the meaning of liberation. It is not just freedom from enslavement under an oppressive political regime. The liberation God promises is a total liberation of body, mind, and spirit. The Psalmist reminds us that God "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Ps 147.3) and that "The LORD lifts up the lowly" (Ps 147.6). For those who suffer from any condition, be it physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual, that prevents them from living into the fullness of who God created them to be is indeed oppressed. Oppressed and in need of liberation. Of healing.

This is clearly demonstrated in our reading from Mark's Gospel, where Jesus not only heals Simon's mother-in-law, but then also proceeds to heal all those who were brought to him. "And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons" (Mk 1.34a). Everywhere he goes, Jesus heals the people and sets them free of their own personal oppressions. As we see throughout the gospels, there is no sickness – be it physical, mental, psychological, or spiritual – that, once touched by Jesus, does not succumb to the power of God's love and mercy. That does not lead to personal liberation.

Looking at Jesus' entire life, particularly the end of it, reveals that his whole life and ministry was about bringing liberation from that which oppresses God's beloved children. And what are the greatest oppressions of all? Sin and death. We become enslaved to our sins and the associated guilt those sins carry. Our sins weights us down as with chains. Think the Ghost of Jacob Marley in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. And certainly the greatest oppression for many is the specter of death. We spend so much of our lives dreading death, finding ways to improve our health so as to prolong our lives and hold off death another day. Sometimes, we even manage to cheat death. For many, this obsession with death is the ultimate form of oppression. But even when it comes to sin and death, Jesus ultimately provides liberation. In his own death and resurrection, he he sets us free from sin and death. The ultimate liberation.

So these healings that feature so prominently in today's Gospel reading are really symbolic of God having something even greater in store for us. As one commentator notes, Jesus' "healings are not just random acts of charity on the way to the cross but are integral to the very point that his death and resurrection make: that God's intention in this world is human well-being and life, even in the face of death" (*Synthesis*, Epiphany 5, February 4, 2018).

This takes us back to our icon – Simon's mother-in-law. Who herself is brought back to well-being and life, even in the face of her own death. What does well-being look like, even in the face of death? For healing is not enough. Something has to follow the healing. Once healed, we need to get out of bed, back onto our feet, and back into the life that God liberated us to live into. As the Rev. Dr. Susanna Metz notes, Jesus "wasn't eager just to gain acclaim as someone who could *fix* stuff, get your mother-in-law off the couch and back into the kitchen. Yes, his compassion for people drew him to heal the sick, reach out to the marginalized, restore people to their communities; but his focus in all that was to point beyond himself to God and what it meant to live as God's people" (*Synthesis*, Epiphany 5, February 4, 2018).

We see this particularly in the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus doesn't just heal her of her physical infirmity. He shows her God's love and mercy. He gives her back her sense of purpose. Not only was she oppressed by being sick to the point of death. That illness robbed her of her sense of being. In her sickness, she was denied her role and purpose in the community. That of providing hospitality. Her calling, and her sense of dignity and joy were to show hospitality to guests in her home. In Jesus healing her, she is once again free to provide hospitality, to serve others. That's why she gets up and immediately begins to serve them. The specific word translated "to serve" is the same word Jesus will later use when he describes himself as "one who comes to serve" (Mk. 10:45). When he reveals to the disciples just before

his triumphal entry into Jerusalem – days before his own death – what will befall him. That his destiny is to be one who serves. Even to the point of death.

In getting up and serving those in her house, Simon's mother-in-law is not merely submitting to the cultural expectation that the woman does the serving. She is living into her calling of discipleship. To serve others as Jesus has and will serve others. The Greek word describing her activity – *diakonia*, to serve others – will become a central Christian theological term. One that encompasses the call to serve others, particularly the poor and oppressed. This is the root from which we get the term deacon, whose vocation emphasizes servant ministry. In her actions, Simon's mother-in-law is for all intents and purposes the first deacon. She is the first to embody the ideal of discipleship as being of service to others. A mandate that Jesus requires of all his followers.

This is the great paradox of liberation by God through Christ. That Christian freedom means that we are freed from that which oppresses us so that we might become a servant to others. Paul touches on this in the Epistle reading for today. What Paul is really getting at is that through Christ, he has been liberated of that which oppresses him. That he has been set free from the constraints of secular categories, of societal expectations – slave or free citizen, Jew or Gentile, powerful or weak – to be open to serving whoever needs to be cared for, whoever needs to hear the message of the Gospel. In his freedom, he is able to go to whoever might need ministering to. In his freedom, he is able to serve those in need, so that they too, might find liberation from that which oppresses them.

Jesus extends his hand of healing to us. In so doing, he offers more than just healing. He offers liberation. Freedom from whatever enslaves us. We cannot help but respond with joy for the gift received. The highest possible response is to use our newly acquired freedom to become a servant. To help others who are themselves oppressed. And so Jesus calls us into ministry as servants. Whereby we might extend our hands of help and healing to others. That they, too, might find the liberation and joy that only Christ can provide.