

Sermon Epiphany B
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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Mark 1:29-39

As soon as [Jesus and the disciples] 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 sunset, 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.

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Well you know we are in the Gospel of Mark because we get this rapid-fire succession of stories that move at quite a clip from one to another as Jesus is launched into public ministry, going from place to place teaching and healing. So far in the Gospel of Mark, we've gotten the story of Jesus' baptism, His being driven out into the wilderness for 40 days, The calling of the first disciples, and last week, Jesus teaching in the synagogue and casting out demons.

Now (as you might imagine) word is spreading about him all around the region. And in today's story, Jesus tells the disciples what he "came to do." He came to spread the message. He's got towns to visit, people to see, and a message to share: the kingdom of God has come near...in me. But first, he has to heal. And we hear that this healing extends to a member of the family of his brand-new disciple Simon Peter. Peter's mother-in-law is sick. And so Jesus goes in to heal her.

And I can tell you when this story says that after he he is healed she immediately gets up and starts serving them, plenty of the women in the room felt some kinda way about that. It's so nice that Jesus heals her from her fever, but can't a lady get a break? Can't a mother not get the leisure of one sick day?!

We don't know much about this woman, but we do know that she was a mom - she was the mother of Simon Peter's wife. You've heard of the stages of grief. Well, let me tell you about the stages of moms getting sick: Stage #1 is of course Denial. ("Oh it's just allergies..." or for me "it's Christmas and I am a pastor and a mother of two, I can't be getting sick!") Stage #2 is Disappointment. For moms, let's be honest, it's disappointment in ourself, that our own immune system has let us down. Stage #3 is Medicating. ("Maybe with the right combination, I can just push through...") Stage #4 is Acceptance. ("I guess I'm not going to be able to take little Johnny to the jump zone birthday party...") And the ultimate stage #5: Mom guilt. ("I'm letting everybody down...")

You're laying there, incapacitated, while life goes on without you. Which can be great! Sometimes we need a break! And it's terrible! You feel so bad (literally)...and then you feel bad for feeling bad... Like I said: GUILT. And for most of us, that's the extent of it. But for some, it gets worse. For some, with a serious enough

diagnosis, comes fear. Fear not just of letting your family down, but of leaving them behind, without the one person they rely on most.

In the gospel story today, we don't know how sick Peter's mother-in-law was, but we do know that back in those days, being sick in bed with a fever was no trifling matter. For all we know, this first century mother was rounding the corner from guilt to fear due to the severity of her condition. But whatever the prognosis... Jesus comes to her. Jesus hears of her illness and he comes in to her and takes her by the hand. Jesus has work to do - he has places to go - he said as much himself... but first, Mark tells us, as soon as he hears of the illness of Peter's mother-in-law, he goes to her. I wonder if she protested. I wonder if mom guilt kicked in - "No, no Jesus don't worry about me! I know how busy you are. "Go, go - get back out there - everyone is here to see you, I'll be fine..." Sound familiar to anyone?

But that is not the kind of Lord we have. Before the people, and the towns and the message, comes you. The one who is sick and in need of healing. You, the one he came to see, the one he came to save. Wherever you find yourself, no matter how lost, hidden, or paralyzed you might feel. Whatever illness, pain or sin you may be suffering with, open up the door, because Jesus is coming in. No matter what kind of guilt you may be carrying, Jesus is there. You are his priority. He's coming in to be there with you.

I remember when my girls had just been born and we were still in Lexington Hospital, I experienced my first hit of mom guilt. And oo that stuff is potent! When those new-mom hormones kick in and tell you what to do, trying to stop them is like trying to stop a freight train. My new-mom hormones said it was time to take those babies home. We'd spent two nights in the hospital already, and it was time for this new mama and daddy to watch that little video or whatever you have to do and buckle them into their car seats and go home.

But the doctors said something else. They said it was not time to go home. In fact, they would not say it was time to go home for another five days. And during those days, instead of getting those babies home and nestling them in to their little bassinets and dressing them up in all the new little baby clothes... I was going to have to keep them checked into the hospital's baby nursery for days on end while I kept my behind in bed.

Y'all, I went through *all* the stages: The denial: I couldn't be unwell. I was a mom now. I had a job to do. The disappointment, of course the trial-and-error medication, and I think anger might have gotten thrown in the mix... and, of course, the guilt. The crushing guilt. As many of you know, when you're in that bed (for whatever reason) and God and everybody knows you cannot get out of it (at least for very long), there's a point where you have to accept it and just let Jesus in. Let him in, let him take your hand, Let him be the strong one.

I remember at one point during that long stay at Lexington hospital, Poor Kris - who was my rock, who if he was scared, never let me know - had been sleeping on those horrible hospital room benches and chairs. And one night he looked at the hospital bed and asked, "Do you think there's room for me in there?" And sure enough, he fit! I thought about that postnatal sleeping arrangement this week. When we are in need of Jesus' healing presence, he comes up to our sick bed and asks: "Do you think there's room for me in there?"

Jesus comes in, to take us by the hand, to be present with us in our illness, no matter what stage we're in - whether we're just finding out that something's not quite right... or whether we're in treatment... or whether it looks to all the world as if nothing at all is happening but in fact we are in the stage of deep rest our tired bodies need the most... and then, Jesus heals.

In the story of Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus heals her and she immediately begins serving them. And although I was snarky about this at the beginning of the sermon, the point of that detail in the story is this: She's really healed - she's well enough to get up and do, and She is restored to community She is playing her part, doing what she can, offering what she is able to participate in kingdom community, to use her gifts to serve the Lord. And as any mom would, what she wants to do is welcome in her family and their guests, provide for them, and make them feel at home.

It's nice to get a sick day every once in a while (when it's not CHRISTMAS), but it's even better to be restored to doing the things that you have been called and equipped to do, whatever it may be. If you pay close attention, so many of the healing stories are couched in the context of restoration to community. For man who was healed last week, the context was the synagogue - the faith community - to which, after being released from what possessed him - he could return, and be an active participant in the household of God.

When Jesus heals the son of a widow, he returns him to his mother, therefore restoring her to standing within the community, where without a living son or husband she would have no household to call her own. And with the woman in today's story, Jesus not only restored her health, but he restored her identity. She had a place in that family, she had a role to play in that community, and Jesus cared enough to come in, and lift her up, and restore her to the life she so longed to live.

The season of Epiphany is the time where we get stories that show forth who Jesus is. We celebrated his arrival at Christmas, and now we need to see what he came to do. And while Jesus does the physical things - the healings, the feedings - astute students of the Bible will see that the physical part is not the whole story. That there's a spiritual component to everything that Jesus does. Yes, Jesus want to feed the hungry - but even more he wants us to understand that he is the bread of life, and that those who are fed by his body and blood will never be hungry again. Yes, he wants to heal the sick - but even more so he wants to show That his ministry is a ministry of reconciliation - restoring broken lives, broken relationships, ruptured communities, and reconciling all sinners back to their heavenly Father who loves them.

The real issue with Peter's mother in law isn't the fever. It's the isolation, it's the withdrawal, it's that the kingdom of God has come near... and she's missing out. She's missing out on her opportunity to hear, to see and to serve in the kingdom of heaven come to earth. The real issue with me when I was laying in that hospital bed, was not about grappling with a particular a medical diagnosis (although I'm sure glad my wonderful doctors were focused on that) but it was getting me home to do what I knew in my bones I was put on this earth to do: be Stella and Virginia's mom.

There will be a time for all of us where whatever has gotten ahold of our earthly bodies will not have a cure. And when Jesus shows up and climbs on into our sick bed It won't be to get us bak on our feet, but instead to carry us home. Even on that day, the real issue at hand won't be the illness or infirmity, even then, it will be reconciliation, and that by the grace of God, the work of Jesus will be about reconciling us to himself once and for all. Like the new song says "whether it's your best day, your worst day, some Tuesday" or I'd add *your last day*, "every day's a good day" to let Jesus in to accomplish his healing, saving, reconciling work in your life.

As we move from through the Epiphany season and on to the rest of the year, may we retain that focus on who Jesus is and what he came to do. First and foremost, he came to be with us, even at your darkest. Second, he came to put an end to isolation and separation. And third, he came for reconciliation of individuals, communities and even heaven and earth. So everything we do around here, this and every season, should be about that work of finding the lost, of building community of being, with Jesus, called "repairers of the breach" Equipping and empowering one another to get back to the work we know in our bones we were called by Christ to do.