

## *2024 Epiphany 5B*

Many years ago, when I was still in seminary, I volunteered briefly with Common Cathedral. This is a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts which has communion outdoors on Boston Common every week, and then offers sandwiches to anyone who wants them, “housed or unhoused,” to use the language of their website.

I ended up helping them in their ministry to their ‘unhoused’ folks who ended up in the hospital. I didn’t go often, in part because we were still all learning how to manage HIPAA regulations which often prevented me seeing the person once I arrived, and in part because it was not an easy hospital to get to. But I will never, ever forget one particular visit. It was my first experience of being completely ‘gowned up’—wearing protective layers of a full-length paper gown, mask, cap, shoe coverings and gloves. I wondered how frightening it must be for this woman, who clearly had mental health issues, to be confronted by this almost alien sight.

In the course of the visit, I offered to pray with her, which she accepted eagerly. We took each other’s hands and bowed our heads. As we prayed, I felt her snake her finger up to the top of my glove, to a little tiny patch of uncovered skin. She ran her fingertip over it as we prayed, and it occurred to me that she never felt anyone’s touch anymore. Everyone she

encountered was covered in paper and latex, to protect themselves from whatever it was that had her there. She was diseased first, and human after.

I hope that that touch was comforting to her. It may well be that it was the last time she felt another person's skin at all—she died soon after and I believe I was her last visitor.

In today's Gospel reading, as in so many of the healing stories, we hear that Jesus touched the person he healed. In this case it was Simon's mother-in-law. "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up."

I don't think any of us would respond to that idea of him taking her by the hand with the kind of shock it would have engendered in that room that day. He was breaking a number of purity laws and cultural taboos in this one little act of touching a sick woman. It's *odd*, to put it mildly.

There is a lot about this story that is odd. It's odd that she's living with her daughter and son-in-law. If a woman is living in her married daughter's house, it's because there is *no place else* for her to be. She is obviously a widow, but a widow would have been expected to go live in her son's house—that's how things were done. If her son couldn't take her in, she would go back to her family of origin. Her father, if he was still alive, or a brother, or some blood-related male had the obligation to take care of her. Being dependent

upon a male who was not a direct relative of hers put her in a very precarious situation—he had no real responsibility to her.

It is a sign of Simon’s generosity that he made a place for her, and perhaps a sign of real affection that his first concern upon arriving home was to seek healing for her. A fever was a serious thing in those days without antibiotics. A fever could mean death—and a different person might have privately welcomed having one less mouth to feed, and not made such a point of bringing her to the attention of the one who can heal her.

It is also odd that once she is healed, she immediately gets up and serves them all.

I know, I know—probably a lot of you groaned inwardly (or even outwardly!) when you hear that as soon as she was healed, she “began to serve them.” Our 21<sup>st</sup> century, full-equality-for-women ears get annoyed by it.

“How typical,” we think. “The boys come home, Mom’s too sick to cook, so they get the miracle worker to heal her so that she’ll get back on her feet and get dinner ready! Some things never change!”

But that is not at all what is going on here. This is not about a meek, subservient little woman who puts her own needs aside in order to keep everyone else happy. Something else is going on.

The word used to describe her activity is 'diakoneo.' It's translated "to serve" here. Earlier in this chapter it was used to describe the activity of angels who come to Jesus after the temptation in the wilderness, and there it is translated "minister to." It is the same verb that Jesus will later use to describe the proper activity of the disciples. He isn't putting her down. He's lifting her up—figuratively as well as physically. She hasn't just been cured of her fever; she's been restored to relationship with others. Jesus is offering her a new life. A kingdom life. Jesus considered her important enough to be made well, and she responds by serving him.

An encounter with Jesus demands a response. One can't remain neutral when Jesus was around. Illness is driven out in the reconciling, healing presence of Christ. The fractured, fragmented souls of those tormented by demons (however you want to understand that) were pulled together and made whole. The religious law that had become a barrier instead of a boundary were pushed back down, to make room for all people. Jesus healed individuals, but Jesus was ultimately interested in healing all of creation.

We are nearing the end of the season of Epiphany. Next week we'll finish out this season of light with the story of the Transfiguration. So for one last time, I want to remind us of the promise of the Incarnation. Our God is not just one who looks "down" on us from a distance, who sees us as small and insignificant as grasshoppers.

Our God is also there beside us, holding out a hand, offering to lift us up as on eagles' wings. The God who is with us in Jesus is still just as passionate for all of us to be healed, made whole, reconciled with God and one another, so that we have strength, faith and courage, to follow Jesus where he leads. Into a life of joyful service—diakoneo—as disciples.

Amen.