Homily for Epiphany 5B

February 7, 2021

S. Stephen’s, Providence

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week,

we encountered Jesus performing his first public healing in Mark’s Gospel,

which was the exorcism of a man in the synagogue.

This week,

we have in our Gospel reading what follows immediately after:

another healing.

But in this case, instead of a strange man and unclean spirits,

we encounter a familiar woman and a fever.

The woman is the mother-in-law of Simon Peter.

It would appear that Jesus and his disciples have left the synagogue

intending to return to Simon’s home for a midday meal.

Simon’s mother-in-law, we can imagine,

would have spent the morning preparing for it,

eagerly awaiting her guests – especially this Jesus she has kept hearing about.

How many of us have found ourselves in a similar situation? –

Readying the house for a special holiday meal,

or preparing a special dinner for a festive occasion.

I know it’s been awhile for many of us –

the past year has not been one conducive for entertaining on a large scale.

But you know the hours you spend –

the trip to the grocery store a day or two beforehand,

the dusting and vacuuming and other tidying up,

and of course the meal itself.

The table is set –

special glasses set out that we probably don’t use every day make an appearance.

You get the picture I’m trying to paint.

Well! The last thing you need is to be laid out flat on your back by a fever.

Again, we’ve all been there –

suddenly incapacitated by an illness we simply don’t have time for,

because there are important things that need attended to.

We can presume that Jesus and his disciples had no reason to believe

they would arrive at Simon Peter’s home to this scene:

as far as Simon Peter knew, when he had left, his mother-in-law had been fine.

Whatever had been bothering her earlier in the morning and quickly taken hold,

and now she lay in her bed, desperately ill.

In the days before antibiotics and other medicines,

a fever could ultimately prove fatal.

Naturally, given what Jesus has just displayed at the synagogue,

all eyes quickly turn to him for help.

Mark tells us in a succinct and very matter-of-fact way

that Jesus simply takes her by the hand and raises her up.

The fever leaves her, and she begins to serve them.

No fanfare – no dramatic amazement. Just back to business as usual.

Now our 21st century sensibilities might be slightly horrified

that Simon’s mother-in-law has been healed only to then at once

return to her work and serve all these men who have entered her household.

On one hand,

we can see that Jesus, despite being God Incarnate,

was every much a part of the social and cultural norms of his day.

On the other, to get hung up on what seems like unfair treatment

is to miss the point, and to bring our own cultural expectations to a message

written in a very different time for a very different people 2,000 years ago.

The point here is that Simon Peter’s mother-in-law

was restored to the fullness of her place within both her household and society.

She is restored to full value and her rightful function

within the society of which she is a part.

Like Jesus, she too cannot escape the cultural norms of her time.

Yet if we put ourselves in her shoes,

we can quickly understand why she was only too eager to serve them.

If any of us had quickly been incapacitated with illness

with only hours to go before an important dinner party,

we would all be desperate to feel better again as quickly as possible.

If, like Peter’s mother-in-law, we felt completely restored to health,

we too would be only too happy to get back to work,

and serve the meal we’d hoped to serve – taking pride both in our work,

and in the hospitality shown to our distinguished guest.

Peter’s mother-in-law was doubtless likewise happy to get back to it:

and though we never learn her name,

she clearly occupies a position of importance in her family and community.

She too, we may gather, will become a disciple.

For all we know,

she may be one of the group of women who stand a far off

watching Jesus die on the cross,

while the all the men have fled –

Simon Peter, her own son-in-law having shamefully denied Jesus three times.

But now we’re getting ahead of our story…

After healing Simon’s mother-in-law,

Jesus too gets back to work –

we are told that people from all across the city come to Simon’s home

to be healed by Jesus and to see these things take place.

In an age before television news,

word still managed to get around,

and this was the lead story that evening.

The next day, Jesus rises early, goes out to a deserted place to pray alone,

and then sets out with his disciples to proclaim their message

and cast out demons across the entire region of Galilee.

Jesus is literally a man on a mission,

and all of our readings today would have us motivated and mobilized –

ready to get to work in spreading the Good News.

This set of readings,

given to us within the space of time between the Epiphany and Ash Wednesday,

in which every year we focus on the call of the disciples

and the spread of the Good News of God’s kingdom in Jesus’s earthly ministry,

finds us in a strange space this year.

A set of readings meant to encourage us to action,

and which describe to us people brought back from the brink of death,

and restored to fullness of life,

may seem a tad insensitive this year,

or at the very least, slightly deaf to our current predicament.

A pandemic has raged,

and for many who languished in hospital beds,

there was no one to take them by the hand and restore them to health.

Instead of getting out into our neighborhoods to proclaim the good news,

we retreat within our homes for safety,

and rely on the medium of livestreaming to communicate to you even now.

Even without a pandemic,

we are well aware of people, sometimes those closest to us,

who suffer from a terminal disease,

and for whom there is no physical cure to restore them to the fullness of life

which they once enjoyed.

And even for those of us who remain healthy in this time,

we long for God to come and take our world by the hand, as it were,

and raise it back to perfect health

with the same ease he raises Simon’s mother-in-law to immediate health.

For the cynic or the doubter,

this will always be a way of showing that God doesn’t really exist –

that the worldview of religion is fanciful and based upon fairy tales,

which can now be shown to be untrue and worthy of ridicule.

However, for the believer – for the follower of Jesus,

we hear in today’s Gospel and at all times

God’s will for us.

We see that when God is about in the world,

and when Jesus is making known God’s desire for humanity

as he goes about his earthly ministry,

that God desires for all of us life and wholeness.

This is what the kingdom of God looks like –

people who are sick and broken being healed and being made whole.

And yet death comes to all of us eventually.

Jesus came to destroy sin and death – and conquer them he did.

Yet it was never in God’s plan that we should escape our biological fate.

We are born and live and we die.

If we are so blessed, we give birth to children, who have more children.

But the physical decay of the body was something which was never intended

to be defeated or overcome.

I committed the body of Dorothy Merrill to the ground yesterday –

someone who had not been in the parish for many years at this point.

As I stood at the grave,

I reminded her family that for the Christian, death is not to be feared,

even though it brings great sadness.

In fact, Christian dying is a part of Christian life.

For to us, when our mortal bodies die, life is changed not ended.

We enter into nearer life with our Lord,

and know more fullness of joy than ever before.

As many families know, whether due to a terminal illness like cancer,

or Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, or Multiple Sclerosis,

or whether from the complications of COVID-19,

at a certain point,

Jesus taking the hand of the sick person and raising them to life

begins to look different.

The wholeness and healing that can be offered are more for the soul,

than for the body.

And yet the promise of Christ is still there –

that death no longer has the ultimate victory over life,

because he has, in his own dying and rising,

provided the ultimate healing miracle for all of us.

He has already offered his hand and raised us up,

so that, like Simon Peter’s mother-in-law,

we can be about our work and enjoy the fullness of life.

We can go about our lives, knowing that, through our baptisms,

we have already died with Christ and have been raised with him.

Like all those healed in the Gospels,

we are to rejoice and give thanks to God,

and go and tell others what he has done for us.

Even COVID has not stopped that –

we still have a message to proclaim,

and there are people who stand in need of its good news,

and of the healing which Jesus provides.

Hear again the words of St. Paul:

“For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”

“ … I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

As Isaiah proclaims to us,

there are those who have not known, and who have not heard,

who await the news of God’s everlasting righteousness:

“The Lord is the everlasting God,  
    the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
  
He gives power to the faint,  
    and to him who has no might he increases strength.  
… they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
    they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
    they shall walk and not faint.”

O house of Israel, O saints of God,

ye holy people of God in this time and this place,

wait for the Lord.

We shall run and not be weary.

We shall walk and not faint.

We shall be restored to fullness of life,

in this age, and in the age to come.

Amen.