

Epiphany Five - B
February 8, 2009
St. David's

Most of you know that I am not overly prone toward physical violence. But I have to admit, I was so incredulous on the day in question, that my gut reaction was, "I want to deck this guy." That was not the best response, because I was supposed to be on my best behavior. After all, I was meeting Jean's extended family for the first time. Things were going well enough as the meal was being prepared and I met the throngs of family members. But I kept noticing that as everyone else helped in some fashion in getting ready to eat, this one dude just sat there the entire time in this big lazy boy. He was a young man, perhaps a bit overweight, but otherwise healthy enough looking. I stood there gawking as this guy's wife, (Jean's cousin,) ran circles around the room, attending to everyone's needs and wants, while simultaneously cooking. But no matter how busy she became, her husband continually demanded, in the most condescending manner, that she do something else for him. "Get me a drink. The potato chips are empty. I need a napkin now."

I later learned that Jean's cousin's husband had a reputation for being a bit a bit of a lazy bum. But this was off the scale ridiculous. Apparently, his behavior had regressed precipitously in recent months. It seemed that he had recently begun to believe that his degrading treatment of his wife was actually justified. Therefore, the intensity of his dismal behavior increased. After Jean saw my jaw drop that day, she pulled me aside and explained what was transpiring. "He just found religion," she said. "Say what?"

It was true. His new found Christianity was a better discovery for him than a gold

mine. Evangelizing his new faith discovery to his fellow males at his workplace at the corporate headquarters for Utz potato chips, (the best potato chips in the world, by the way), he pulled out his bible and turned to today's Gospel. "You guys aren't going to believe it," he started. "Listen to this! Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law, just so she could cook and clean for them!" It says so right here."

Since that day, I have become friends with the gentlemen in question. His theology has modified enough that he no longer treats his wife like dirt. But to this day, there remains a segment of Christianity that takes the patriarchal customs that existed in the Middle East during Biblical times and suggests that these cultural trappings are part of our religious beliefs. They do so, even though Jesus spends his entire ministry trying to end those discriminatory practices and lift women up to a place of honor and dignity in that society. And in fact, that is what is really going on in today's Gospel. A closer look at the culture of the day helps us to realize that a man hearing this story in the first century would have probably had the very opposite reaction of Jean's cousin's husband, who I have purposely left nameless. A male listener in the first century might have responded to the fact that Simon's mother-in-law immediately begins serving after her healing by saying, "Hey, what do you mean this woman is serving men? She's not supposed to even be in the same room when the men are eating." Righteous rabbis would not, under normal conditions, have allowed a woman to wait on them. Within the framework of that culture, hear what the healing of the mother-in-law says. Not only is she healed of the physical illness, but she is suddenly delivered from the oppression of the social mores of the time. Simon's mother-in-law becomes a whole person, able to participate in the life of

a household from which she had been excluded before because of the apparent death of her husband and her own illness. In reality, this is not a story about a woman being subjugated, but instead a story about a woman being liberated from the oppression of her culture.

That is what healing is all about in the Gospel of Mark. Last week, Jesus healed a man possessed by a demonic force. Next week, Jesus will heal a leper. In all three of these stories, not only does Jesus physically heal an individual, but he allows each of these people to reenter a society that had excluded them. They are *set free*, not only of the pain of a physical illness, but from the stigma that caused them to be separated from their family and clan in the first place.

In fact, the concepts of healing and freedom are so similar in the Gospels, that they can almost be used as synonyms. Jesus releases people from their demons, be they physical, spiritual or emotional, so that they may be set free to live full and abundant lives. That is why today's collect says, "set us free, O God...and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son..." That is what the resurrected Christ offers you and me, healing that brings us to true freedom and liberty.

That, in fact, is also what is alluded to in today's Gospel. Jesus walks over to Simon's mother-in-law, he takes her by the hand, and he "raises her up." That word, "raise", is the same one we hear on Easter Sunday. "He is not here. He is *risen*." What Jesus is giving Simon's mother-in-law is a freedom as extensive as the one he will experience himself later in life. That, beloved, is what the healing touch of Christ means for you and me, freedom way beyond the way we have come to use that word.

But wait, there is more. That same Greek word for “raise”, used today to describe what happens to Simon’s nameless mother-in-law, is also used another place in the Gospels. That is on Good Friday, when Jesus is “lifted up” on the cross. What this suggests is that there is another element to God’s freedom also not contained in the 21st century’s American definition of that word. For God, with the freedom we are extended also comes responsibility. We, like Jesus, are called to utilize our freedom for something more than personal advantage.

That’s the part of God’s freedom we often conveniently forget. All of us tend to remember that in the liberation event from which Judaism was born, Yahweh told Moses six different times to go to the Pharaoh and say, “LET MY PEOPLE GO!” But hardly any of us recall the rest of Yahweh’s sentence. “Let my people go, so that they may serve me.” When God frees us, we are called to serve God by serving others. And that is exactly what is going on in today’s Gospel. Simon’s mother-in-law begins to serve, not because that is her job, as Jean’s cousin’s husband so desperately wanted to believe, but because she knows that the healing and freedom she experienced through Jesus, is just like the freedom experienced by those first slaves in Egypt. She has been set free, so she knows that it is now her responsibility to pass on that same gift to others. She begins to diakonio, in the Greek, to serve, to minister to her guests. In other words, Simon’s mother-in-law, who doesn’t even get a name in our Biblical text due to the patriarchal nature of that society, gets something far more important. She gets the Jesus message, way before the males in her company. She understands that because of the freedom she has been given by Jesus, it is now her turn to distribute that same freedom to others

through the gift of service. She, in fact, as Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori has put it, “becomes the first active witness to what a resurrected life in Jesus looks like.” Simon’s mother-in-law is our model of what servant ministry is all about.

Though it is sometimes difficult to tell in the stilted language of Paul, this also seems to be the theme of our reading from his letter to the church in Corinth today. Like Simon’s mother-in-law, Paul too is grateful for the freedom he has experienced through Christ. But he too realizes that this freedom comes with responsibility. “For though I am free with respect to all,” Paul says, “I have made myself a slave to all.” In other words, Paul knows that it is Christ who set him free, now he, like Simon’s mother-in-law, must respond by being a servant to others. In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul points out that he learned this lesson from Jesus himself. “Let the same mind be in you,” Paul says, “that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.”

Here then, beloved, is a core of both Judaism and Christianity. God heals us and frees us. We are liberated because of God. But with this liberation comes responsibility, whether we are a mother-in-law, Jesus or Paul. God frees us so that we may serve others. We are liberated to serve one another.

I believe how successful each of us are in imaging Christ in this, will determine how successful we will be in bringing about God’s reign here on earth. When we can truly become a slave to each other, we will fully realize God’s reign, a world where all are free and all will live with dignity and abundance.

How then, do we best image Christ in our own world? How do we utilize the freedom that God has bestowed upon us to serve those around us? There seems no better way to begin than by following Simon's mother-in-law's example. We serve one another by feeding one another. That's why a food pantry is the central ministry of this church and why everything we do here revolves around food. It is the thought process behind our new meal deal Sunday, where we will serve everyone who comes through that door a full meal. The banquet is the symbol of a healed creation.

But we must also follow in the footsteps of Jesus himself. Healing the sick and freeing those with all levels of emotional, physical and spiritual suffering, was always a central component of his ministry. In the broken world in which we live, it may be even more important than it was in the first century to concentrate our efforts on healing and bringing freedom to those around us. There is not a single day that goes by that I do not have someone come to me in need of healing of one sort or another. That is how great the need for healing has become in our world.

All of us can participate in making others whole again, no matter what our profession. We can bring dignity back to those who are hurting or have been shoved aside by a society with different priorities. We can reach out our hand to each of them, one by one, and lift them up, just like Jesus did.

But we also need to look at the big picture. What can we do to bring dignity and freedom to the most people possible who are suffering? How do we best minister to the people that Jesus ministered to, the people on the edges of society? Any social analysis of the situation in the United States returns us to the fact that 47,000,000 Americans

continue to have no health insurance. Despite the myth that people who do not have health insurance are unemployed, 93% of uninsured Hispanics in this country come from working families. 86% of uninsured African Americans come from working families. I don't dare guess the percentage of people living in Page without health insurance, but based on just the people who request assistance from us every day, the total has to be in the thousands. All of those figures are unforgivable in a country with our resources. But that is only the beginning. Even those of us who have health insurance are almost all under-insured. Virtually all of us are one major medical event away from becoming financially destitute.

This makes health care perhaps the biggest religious and moral issue of our day. If we are going to live into today's Gospel, if we are going to bring freedom and dignity to others and make them whole again, if we are going to heal each other and all of creation, we must do more. Yes, it is wonderful that we have helped so many by paying for their prescriptions for drugs they need to survive, drugs they cannot afford. It is fantastic that we have given freedom to people by providing glasses for those who could not see or teeth for those who could not eat. But we cannot continue to accept a medical system that forces millions to choose between food and drugs, that has families deciding between an early death of a loved one or living in extreme poverty for the rest of their lives. We cannot create freedom for anyone, if we continue to live with a system where children die from preventable diseases because their family cannot afford to go to a hospital. When anyone remains whose dignity is stripped from them because they do not have the option of seeking proper medical care and must instead choose to die a slow and painful death,

than none of us are free.

Enough is enough, beloved. Universal health care is not a political football. It is the healing and the freedom that we are called to bring about by Christ. It is how we must reach out and lift up those millions and millions of people who are in desperate need of healing. It is how we become Christ to others.

Our call then this morning, is to live out our freedom by serving our neighbor. And we can do that most efficiently by relentlessly pushing and pushing and pushing our leaders until universal health care becomes a reality in this country. Certainly there must be someone in this country who pays their taxes and who also has the maturity and the moxy to stand up to the special interests and push through a system that will provide basic health care for everyone. Our call today is to make that happen. That's how we imitate Christ. That's how we bring about Christ's healing and the freedom that follows, to all of God's humanity. Amen.