



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 5 Year B

Touch

[RCL] Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

In the 1st Century world of Jesus, sick people only had a few options. The first thing they could do was try a folk remedy. These varied from sensible potions and poultices to downright dangerous “fixes.” Many folk remedies are still practiced today in the industrialized world and most are completely ineffective, especially with serious diseases and injuries.

The second thing a sick person could do was to pay for a physician to see them. This was costly and was not much more effective than the folk remedies. Most Greek physicians in the 1st century followed the teachings of Hippocrates, who is best known for his famous oath. Hippocrates codified the principles of Humorism, a belief that human health is defined as the perfect balance of four fluids, or humors. It was holistic, in that it saw the need for balance between the mental and physical, but the interventions by physicians often involved bleeding and draining of fluids, which would regularly result in a worsening condition. Treatment was expensive, and therefore only accessible to the privileged.

Another option for sick people in Jesus’ world was one or many religious healing practices. Every ancient religion had extensive teachings on healing, and most of it cost money. With these limited and ineffective options, sickness in the ancient world changed a person’s identity.

Sick people would stand out in a village. They were often visibly scarred or marked. Lepers were required to announce their coming by shouting or ringing bells. Most sick people became beggars, or wholly dependent on their family members for food and shelter. Being labeled a sick person led to very low status in society.

The identity of a sick person in Jesus’ day also carried with it the stigma of God’s judgment. In this society, most illnesses were linked to some sin or indiscretion, rather than a scientific cause. In Jesus’ ministry, he confronted some of these beliefs, showing how widespread they were.

The sick person in our Gospel reading is Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. She has a fever and is so weak that she cannot get out of her sickbed. Her condition is of concern to the disciples, and so Jesus is ushered in to see her. Perhaps a fever would not warrant such concern in our day, but it certainly did in Jesus’ day.

Jesus touches her hand with his hand. There is that touch that we see in Jesus’ ministry over and over again. She rises up at once and the fever leaves her. It is not a very dramatic scene; there isn’t any music or

fanfare. There aren't any spells or incantations. There is only a hand touching another hand. There is only Jesus reaching out to this sick woman.

And then we are told that she starts to serve them. She now has the strength to offer the customary hospitality to her guests. Her identity is no longer a bedridden, fevered person, but a gracious host to a visiting teacher and his disciples.

And then the zombies attack. Well, not real zombies, but a horde of sick, demonized, and injured people swarm Jesus, begging for healing. What we saw happen to Simon's mother-in-law, we see happen to a multitude in the village.

Jesus reached out his hand to a sick woman. Now he reaches out his hand to the multitude just as he reaches out his hand to us. Jesus is here to heal you. Jesus is here to restore you to the community you lost. Jesus is here to restore you to a place of service to your community, so you can find dignity and purpose again. This is what Jesus does: he brings people back to wholeness and health. Jesus can bring *you* back to wholeness and health.

But all this healing takes a toll on Jesus; he disappears in the dark of night to pray. On these occasions of nighttime prayer, we are seldom told the content of Jesus' prayers. They seem to be a conversation between the beloved son and his father, an intimate dialogue that may seem incomprehensible to the disciples or us.

The only time we know the content of Jesus' private, nighttime prayer is in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed. On that night, he strained and writhed under the weight of what he was called to do as the Son of God. He pleaded for the cup to pass from him, even as he accepts God's will for his life. This glimpse of Jesus' prayer life may not be identical to all those other nights he prayed for hours in the dark, but we can be sure it was intense. Jesus' sense of mission empowered him to do the work God had called him to do. When he is exhausted, he goes off and prays in the night, and he comes back renewed.

Perhaps we do not so much need rest as a renewed sense of our mission and calling by God. Perhaps more people would experience wholeness and healing if we spent more time in the dark with God. It was how Jesus found strength, and many Christian saints through the ages found time alone with God to be renewing and refreshing.

Jesus is reaching out his hand to us today, calling us to a life filled with service and community. Jesus is praying for us so we might have the strength to go into the dark with God and wrestle with our calling and mission. Jesus is with us, going before us, into the world God loves so much.

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