FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*Hands On* Mark 1:29-39

The passage just read for us is a continuation of the day that began in last Sunday’s reading. Jesus and the four disciples he has already called have left the synagogue where he preached and healed a man possessed by demons, after which, the gospel says, *“his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”* [v. 28]

If you remember last week’s reading, the only being who knew who Jesus’ identity for sure was the demon in the man who declares, *“you are, the Holy One of God.”* [v. 24c] In fact, the demon cries out in fear when he sees Jesus. Immediately, it knows the power of God when he sees it, and Jesus demonstrates that power by casting it out.

After this very public revelation of his power and identity, Jesus and the four immediately leave and go to Simon’s house. This is an interesting and important move. Rather than stay and take advantage of the “fame” his actions are building for him, Jesus chooses to retreat to a private place, a private home.

Yet, instead of it being a place where he and his power may be at rest, the very first thing Jesus does is heal Simon’s mother-in-law. He could hardly avoid doing this for the gospel says, Simon and the others *“told him about her at once.”* [v. 30b] So, (also) without any hesitation on his part, Jesus *“took her by the hand and lifted her up”* [v. 31]

What would have been very noticeable in his time was the way in which he not only healed her at once, the healing also involved reaching out to physically touch her.

In a place and time when one had to be careful about touching sick people; also in a place and time where a man touching a woman to whom he was not related was not always socially acceptable—Jesus ignored both of these things in order to heal and bring the woman back to wholeness.

He also ignored (again) the fact that it was the Sabbath, when one was not supposed to work—including healing. In one of the tenderest descriptions of Jesus’ interaction with another person, the Gospel of Mark says, *“He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.”* [v. 31]

Hand-to-hand, or hands on, Jesus would not allow her to suffer one more moment.

Many of us notice, that it says that as soon as the fever left her “she began to serve them.” [v. 31b] For many of us, it almost seems as if Jesus’ healing had an ulterior motive, namely: to return the woman to the ability to serve their needs; that she was healed specifically to do the domestic work a woman was supposed to do for the men—like serving a meal, cleaning, or all those other domestic things.

However, when we take a closer look at the word used for “serving” that is used in this passage, what we find is that it was not the usual word for serving. Rather, the word that the gospel uses is the same word that was used earlier when Jesus was undergoing his forty-day trail in the wilderness.

In verse 13, after Satan had tempted him, Mark reports that *“the angels waited on him”*—that is they served him*.* Like Simon’s mother-in-law, they did more than provide domestic service, they ministered to him; they saw to his needs, they alleviated his suffering. So, Simon’s mother-in-law’s service to Jesus and the others was also filled with the same *divine* purpose and was not just a reaffirmation of traditional gender roles.

Indeed, even if her service was in the form of the traditional work of the women of her day, by association, that work was recognized as the blessing it is, and the worthiness it contains. It is not just “women’s work.” It is important. It is valuable. It is filled with divine love and devotion.

Mark presents all three of these stories of service—the angels’, Jesus’, and Simon’s mother-in-law—in rapid succession, and all in the same character and quality. Whether publicly or privately; whether among angels or human beings, alleviating the suffering of others, ministering to others is filled with divine spirit when it is oriented toward the love of God. Therefore it is always appropriate; always welcome and blessed.

Also, in *“lifting her up,”* [v. 31a] we are also meant to remember how Jesus will himself be “lifted up”—not just when he is *crucified*, but rather, when he was *resurrected*; when God “lifted him” out of the tomb and restored him.

So, the way in which Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law is supposed to remind us that we may also extend our hand to another. Even in private spaces where no one else may observe us, we are called to participate in acts of service for others. Further, these acts of service may call us out of our own comfort zone. They may require us to cross long held traditions and social norms.

Ministry, or service to others, is a way for us to participate in God’s ways of love and God’s justice which is always focused on healing and wholeness, and fairness. Service—especially hands-on service to others—is nothing less than joining God in the activity of loving and healing and making things right in the world.

Indeed, what the Gospel of Mark is describing in this passage is something that is probably familiar to some of our special guests this morning—the scouts and adult leaders of Troop 201.

Let us remember that the young people who participate in scouting pledge themselves to being *“trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.”* Their oath asks them to promise *“to help other people at all times; to keep* [themselves] *physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.”*

We, here at Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, are well aware of your helpfulness. We are grateful for the many ways in which you help out around our church—for example on Green Day, and when you set-up tables and chairs for us when we have events in the gym, and the many other ways throughout the year that you do some kind of task for us, or partner with us in some activity.

We are glad to be your troop’s home and to provide you a base from which you may participate in scouting activities, and in other ways of serving the community beyond our church campus. You are welcome here, and I want you to know that your hands-on service is a blessing to us.

However, I also want you, and our congregation to know, that while our service for one another is always a blessing, and while it is great to be acknowledged, it is not always going to be acknowledged. Sometimes it may be as private and personal as Jesus’ healing of Simon’s mother-in-law—something no one else will see.

That does not make it any less a blessing. In fact, it can be even more of a blessing to *you* because it means that you have come to value service for what it is: the healing of another person, or groups of people. Dedication to such values can even make for the healing of an entire nation.

When individuals come together to work and learn together the ways of compassion and service, we not only shape our own hearts and minds, we also provide the many communities that we live in—our families, our circle of friends and associates, our schools, our neighborhoods—we provide all of these groups of people a living example of what we value. We can be a reminder of what it means to care about the well-being of our communities.

I would also like to remind us all that there will be times when our example of faithfulness to love and compassion and justice will not be received favorably among all others. In our community at this very moment there are those on both extremes about such issues as immigration in this country, the wars in Gaza and the Ukraine, what to do about climate change, what to do about the many people we find that are without a home.

The circumstances of all of these issues are complex and not given to easy answers. In fact, meaningful solutions to any and all of them are going to require a deep commitment to the kind of service that is exemplified in the story of Jesus and Simon’s mother-in-law. It is going to require that, rather than leave the work to others, we need to be as “hands-on” as Jesus.

That is, we need to listen and learn about these things. We need to come together to discern how and what we understand about them. Some of us may be given an opportunity to make a direct contribution to the alleviation of the suffering of others. Many more of us will be presented with less direct, but just as necessary means of lifting-up others by raising-up words and ways of compassion, empathy, and justice.

All of these things point to the season of the church year we are in: Epiphany. In the life of Christ, this is the time when he was making himself known in the world—the time when he was revealing God's love to all people. In so doing, he is revealing who God is and what God wants for the world. As Jesus ministers and preaches, we are called to recognition and discernment regarding how we will live with God’s activity.

Through Jesus Chris, God is directing our attention toward a life where goodness, kindness, healing and justice are a hands-on activity, our hands-on activity. Through Jesus’ life and ministry, we are invited to find our own place, our own way of partnering with God as the love of God continues on in our lives through our own hands-on ministries.

Troop 201, I know I speak for our whole church when I say that we are grateful for the ministry we have shared so far. We, at Nu’uanu Congregational Church, are also looking forward to the way we may continue to be a blessing to one another, and to the community beyond this church. May God show us all the "hands-on” service we may do together. Amen.