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Epiphany 5

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I recently ordered a different translation of the Bible, the Common English Bible, and have at the front of it, they outlined a 90 day plan to read the New Testament. While I normally read Scripture as part of the daily office and rarely just stand alone, I decided to try this.

So a few nights ago, I came across the Gospel that we read today in Mark. Since I was reading this Gospel from the start, I realized just how soon this passage is in Mark's Gospel. We have not even reached the second chapter before we see Jesus's first physical healing. Jesus has just been baptized, he has just called his first disciple, and now what we consider Jesus's ministry has begun. And part of this is because Mark tends to write very concise, which I do appreciate, but I also wonder if its earliness in the Gospel allows us to catch an early glimpse into the nature of Christ so that we can start to understand what that means.

Right before this, Jesus has driven out an unclean spirit from a man, but in my mind, the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, is the first *healing* in the Gospel of Mark.

And physical healing in the Bible is tricky. It is hard for me to comprehend, and I think it is hard for many of us not to slide into ableist readings of the healings of Jesus, falling into *if a disabled person prayed hard enough, they would be healed* or *if I had more faith, I would not be sick*.

And on the other side, the desire to want to look over disability is strong, to act like disability does not have a real impact. And so we sugarcoat the isolation that can happen due to the way our world is not set up with disabled people in mind, how they are forgotten, how accessibility, even in churches, is often an afterthought.

And we saw this at the start of the pandemic. Too many conversations were had, and are still had, that since the pandemic only *actually* kills those who are old or disabled, we don't need to care, we don't need to take this seriously.

And that, that is sin.

So then, how do we approach Jesus's healings without falling into these?

I feel like one of the ways we have to approach this is the separation of healing from the amount of love that God has for us.

Jesus's healing of the step mother was simply healing her of her fever. Jesus did not love her more before she was healed, and Jesus did not love her more after she was healed. Jesus, and God's love for us, simply cannot increase or decrease; it is a constant.

And our health, unlike God's love, is not a constant.

And while we are so very aware of this now, Isaiah was aware of it as well.

In today's passage from Isaiah,

*Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted.*

All of us get sick. All of us get tired. All of us will die.
And yet, when God steps in, the sickness and the tiredness, and the death, those aren't the last word.

So then let's look at what the healing allows to happen; what is different, aside from the fever being gone, from before the healing and after? What does Jesus taking away this mother-in-law's fever *do*?

then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

The mother-in-law was healed, and she began to serve. She was healed, and she entered into communal life, she entered into service to those around her. She was restored.

And while the fever was in no way sinful, it did prevent her from living fully with those around her. The things that separate us from living fully with those around us, and ourselves that disconnect us from God and from each other, these things do not last forever with God.

Our disconnect from each other, is never the last word, it is not the end.

Through Christ, through our restoration and healing through him, we do not remain in our disconnect. We are restored into selves that can serve and love both one another and God.

I also want to look at *how* Jesus heals the mother-in-law (and I really wish she had a name so I could stop calling her the mother-in-law). We are almost approaching the end of the season of Epiphany that began with the visitation of the Magi to Jesus after Christmas. During this season, the nature of Jesus is beginning to be revealed to us. The earth received this child, this Son of God on Christmas, and during Epiphany we begin to see what having God among us actually means.

To return to today's Gospel...

In healing the mother-in-law,
He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Jesus did not speak. He did not pray to God. He did not renounce anything, but rather simply *took her by the hand and helped her to stand.*

Earlier this week we celebrated the Feast of the Presentation in the Temple, where Jesus and Mary are presented at the temple 40 days after his birth.

And when Jesus is presented, he is greeted by the prophets Anna and Simeon. We learn in Luke that Anna and Simeon are *old*; Anna is at least 84. And when they meet the tiny, just over a month old Jesus, both of them recognize him as the Savior and begin to pray.

And I truly cannot express enough how much of a baby Jesus is at the Presentation in the Temple. In his humanity, he is so vulnerable and so small. He is just over a month old. And in this vulnerability and smallness, Simeon and Anna recognize him to be this Savior. Not by his actions, but simply by his being.

And to go back to the healing of the mother-in-law, the fever leaves the mother-in-law not because of any action that Jesus undertook, but rather simply because of who Jesus is.

There is a property of Jesus, a property of God, a property of that child born to us a few months ago, that heals and restores, and by doing so, allows us to love each other, God, and ourselves.

Jesus heals simply through touch, simply through his being.

And, while the mother-in-law and disciples do not yet know it, Jesus raises the dead simply by who he is.

In the words of Father Robert Farrar Capon,
“They all rise not because Jesus does a number on them, not because he puts some magical resurrection machinery into gear, but simply because *he has that effect on the dead*. They rise because he is the Resurrection even before he himself rises—because, in other words, he is the grand sacrament, the real presence, of the mystery of a kingdom in which everybody rises.¹

And Isaiah gets at a similar thing:

He Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those 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.

The Lord has come among us to restore us, all of us, and to bring us to life.

The infant Anna and Simeon met in the temple is the same one who heals the mother-in-law is the same one who will eventually raise Lazarus and us all from the dead is the same one who is even today calling us out of death and into life.

¹ 1: Father Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgement*