

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
5th Sunday after the Epiphany/Year B
February 5, 2012
Text: Mark 1: 29-39

“He took her by the hand”

Perhaps she wasn't as old as she appeared although today she felt as if she had aged an extra 20 years in the several days she had been laid low. The sparkle had gone from her eyes and her usual quick smile was not there. The wrinkles on her face and skin may have come from the harsh sun that she had grown accustomed to all these years but maybe now some of those lines seemed more pronounced in recent days from worry and pain. She heard voices outside the door. The door opened and in walked Simon and his brother Andrew and three other men. Two of them looked vaguely familiar. Maybe she had seen them on the streets or near the market place but the third man she did not recognize. She wanted to get up to greet them in her usual way but she had no strength and beads of sweat started to form again. “Rest now” Peter said to her and turning he said to the Stranger, “This is my mother-in-law. She is not well. I'm sure we can find something here to offer you.” Perhaps the Stranger already knew of her malady or saw the pain in her face. As their eyes met he knew what he wanted to do, he needed to do. He went to her side and took her hand. “Who are you?” she thought to herself but did not ask. His eyes said, “Trust me.” The warmth and feel of his hands intertwined with hers and as he raised her up, she felt a power and calm she had not felt in many days. Immediately she felt exuberant-better than her old self. And she began to prepare a meal for her guests.

Mark's Gospel, the shortest of the four gospels, is not known for its lengthy stories. Over the last couple of weeks we have been given a glimpse of Jesus' ministry in just a few short verses. He has been baptized, tempted in the desert, called a few disciples, taught in the synagogue and cured a man of his demon. Today, he has healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law and after taking a little rest, Jesus is off again to teach and heal again and again.

The healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law does not seem all that important at first. It is not as compelling or dramatic a story like Jesus speaking to demons and casting them out, walking upon water, or feeding

thousands of people with a few loaves and a couple of fish but there is something for us to know and to remember.

In Jesus' time, illness bore a heavy social cost. One would be unable to earn a living or contribute to their household and their ability to take their role in community was often cut off. The sick, the lame, the blind, and the deaf all had no choice but to be considered less than, to be the outsiders. As Simon Peter's mother-in-law is touched and healed by Jesus, she again becomes part of the social world again and a person of value. Jesus not only healed her body but brought her to full life again outside her sick room. More than that Simon Peter's mother-in-law becomes a model for our own servant ministry. After being raised from her bed by taking the hands of Jesus those same hands feed her guests. She is able to serve, to move beyond herself having been given a healing hand.

Within a few more verses Jesus again heals and restores. We are told that "at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons..." By his touch many more were made whole. The healing of Simon's mother-in-law was only the beginning.

As in Jesus' time the world is in need of healing. People everywhere long to be healed and made whole. People long to be treated with dignity and respect, to be treated fairly, to be treated equally.

What our readings show us today is that we are fiercely loved and precious to God. All creation, all beings matter. God cares for the weak and the strong, the poor and the rich. God is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of *all* persons. We are reminded of that in the first reading from Isaiah:

²⁹He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. ³⁰Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; ³¹but 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 personalizing love Jesus shows to those around him and those who sought him, Simon Peter's mother-in-law included, testifies to this. In Jesus, God put on flesh to show us God's way of loving and cherishing each

of us a beloved child of God. God is always ready to heal us and raise us up to new life again and again. God's hand is there in sadness. God's hand is there in illness. God's hand is there when we are hurt, alone or too stressed out to see anything else.

Look at your hands for a moment. Look at your hands... Our hands are capable of so many things. They are made to create works of beauty, to build, to soothe and comfort, to feed, to heal, to serve, to love.

We often say that Christians are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. Where we are concerned, our response should be something like Paul's answer. We are to imitate the One who was made incarnate for the world, by being for it ourselves.

Let us ask ourselves this week: Will I allow myself be taken by the hand of Jesus and be lifted up? And then, how will I join these hands that have been blessed and reach out, and lift others to healing and wholeness?

*Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*
-Thomas A. Dorsey, 1932

Amen.