

Sermon
Epiphany 5-B
Saint Andrew's, Methuen
February 7, 2021
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Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

Mark and the other gospels are clear: Healing is central to Jesus's mission of making manifest the Realm of God. It shows not only that Jesus **can** heal, but also shows that Jesus, and hence, God, **wants** to heal.

Last week I talked about Episcopal laywoman Agnes Sanford who had a powerful healing ministry based on her experience that God is present with us and in us.

It's interesting that she came to this view of healing given that her parents, Southern Presbyterian missionaries in China in the early decades of the 20th century, believed in Cessationism—the doctrine that healing ceased after the apostolic age.

When her one-year-old sister was dying of amoebic dysentery there was no medicine or doctor available in their village in northern China. Agnes remembers her father crying out, "Oh, little girl, little girl, if there was only something, we could do for you."

Sanford in her autobiography Sealed Orders writes, "There was. For I have seen many such an illness healed almost instantly by the prayer of faith. If he had only known to give himself as a channel for God's power, laying both hands on the child, praying for her...she could have recovered **as Peter's wife's mother recovered when Jesus rebuked the fever and it left her.**" Page 16

Which brings us to this morning's gospel when Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, as well as the many others brought to the house for healing.

If the gospel reading ended there we would be left with the picture of Jesus as a superhero with magical powers. This picture leads us to our own type of Cessationism in which all Jesus adds to our lives is comforting teaching about being nice. Cessationism in any form is not a proclamation of the Realm of God, but a belief that life is devoid of the Spirit of God and all we have left is the colorless flatland of a material universe.

Mark, however, gives us the rest of the story: **"In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."**

The Greek word for "prayed" is the same word used after Jesus heals the boy with epilepsy in Mark 9. You remember the disciples ask him why they couldn't heal the boy and Jesus says, **"This kind can come out only through prayer."**

Obviously, prayer here means something quite different from what we mean by the word. Generally, for us prayer means to recite a prayer or to talk to God about our day.

These are important types of prayer, but they are not the only type, or even the most important type in the New Testament.

So, let's look at what Mark is telling us: First, this kind of praying begins by a withdrawal—a withdrawal to a place away from one's ordinary external life.

On Ash Wednesday we will read this from Matthew 6:6-7: Jesus said, **"But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret..."**

We go to the deserted place, not just in the outside world, but in the inside world of our own souls. As we learn how to ignore our over-active thinking, we become aware of God's presence and we rest in it. As Jesus says in John 15: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you."

We abide in God, in Christ, in Holy Spirit. We abide, we don't talk.

That's why Jesus also says in Matthew 6: When you are doing this kind of praying, **"do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words."**

The spiritual masters in every age tell us that in order to enter the silence of the heart **we should choose one word, or a short phrase**, to say whenever we realize our inner silence is getting entangled in thinking. When we realize we're no longer resting in God but thinking about Tom Brady and the Super Bowl, we gently and silently return to our inner word and resting in God. Many use the word "Love" or "Peace" or "Come Lord Jesus".

From Scripture we might guess that Jesus's prayer word is "Abba", the Aramaic word for father. As he sits in the dark in that deserted place he slowly sinks into his inner silence and the awareness of Presence.

Then, when he realizes he's thinking about what happened last night or maybe about the weaknesses of his four disciples—especially Peter, **he silently sounds the word "Abba" and returns to resting in the silence of his soul, which is also the presence of God.**

Some of you are aware that what I'm describing is the practice called "Centering Prayer" taught by Trappist monk Father Thomas Keating. I heartily recommend his book Open Mind, Open Heart if you feel a call to this kind of prayer.

Even five minutes of this meditative praying can change your life as it draws you more deeply into your soul where God is.

Without this going into the silence of the inner room, we will remain trapped in the ordinary, distracted mind that Buddhists call "Monkey Mind", full of the voices in the head.

 Jesus's prayer comes to an end when Peter and the others roust him up with their urgent, "Everyone is searching for you."

Surely, they want Jesus to return to please the people, but Jesus wants to please God, so he says, **"Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."**

 Jesus starts his mission in Capernaum, population of 1500, with only 4 disciples—all fishermen, yet, 2000 years later here we are following him.

Here's the thing: no matter how small you might think you and your life is, your soul is filled with the glory of God.

No matter how small you think this church is, it is a manifestation of the Realm of God, witnessed by your work with the community garden and the parish in Tanzania.

After this service we have our annual meeting on Zoom. It's important that you show up—not just so we can have a quorum—but also so we can come together to discern God's will for Saint Andrew's mission, especially in this age of Covid where people are desperate to know the love and healing of Christ.