

Trinity United Church of Christ
Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
February 5, 2012
The Rev. George P. Heberling

Isaiah 40: 21-31
Psalm 147: 1-11,20c
I Corinthians 9: 16-23
Mark 1: 29-39

You know those late nights when you are utterly exhausted because you haven't had a moment's rest from the time you woke up? People's demands, expectations, a full "to do" list which isn't complete because you got interrupted along the way? Well, that's the kind of day it had been for Jesus. If you remember from last week's Scripture, the day began at the synagogue in Capernaum, where Jesus preached and taught to the amazement of the people. He spoke as one who had authority. Afterward, He was confronted by the man who was possessed by a demon – ordering the demon to leave the man, that person experienced a healing, which only added to the people's awe of Jesus.

Being the center of attention, Jesus left the synagogue and went directly to the home of Simon and Andrew. There He discovered that Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Jesus went to her, took her by the hand and helped her to get out of bed. Immediately the fever left her and she began to go about her business hosting them.

The word of Jesus' actions must have spread quickly in the small town of Capernaum, for soon after sunset, when the Sabbath had ended, a crowd of people gathered in front of the house – among them were many who were ill and Jesus responded by healing all kinds of diseases and driving out all manner of demons.

The next day, very early in the morning, Jesus went off to be by Himself – it would seem obvious that He felt the need to be refreshed and renewed in prayer. Using God's power to heal probably drained Jesus and He needed this early morning time to be alone. There would not be much time, however, because in short order Simon and the rest came looking for Jesus. Upon finding Him, they told Jesus that everyone was looking for Him.

Jesus could have been upset by this interruption of His quiet time, but instead He simply explained that He could not stay in one place. He had many other villages to which He needed to travel. The message of God's love and mercy at work in the world needed to be shared with as many people as possible.

As I read this morning Scripture, it struck me that the Body of Christ, the Church, really does mirror the life of Jesus even in the beginning of his ministry:

First of all, the Church needs to be a place of healing, both for those within and those outside the fellowship, the community of faith – both those like Simon's mother-in-law, an member of Jesus' extended family of disciples, and those who came as strangers outside the house. As Jesus used the power of God to bring wholeness to the lives of those who came, so the Church needs to offer a place of healing for those who find themselves spiritually broken – who have been overwhelmed by their struggles in life, whether by their own fault or simply as a consequence of life itself. We offer a safe and understanding place to those who are searching and those who want to share their search. The Church has a mighty power given by God, and “God does strengthen those who are weak and tired” – indeed, “those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed,” and as Isaiah says, “they will rise on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary; they will walk and not grow weak.” We, as the Church, do not rely on our own power to bring healing to the world. We only serve as a channel, a vehicle for the healing power of God to be at work through us. People look to the Church, expecting that they will find healing for their lives; a healing that may come about simply by a kind word or a gentle smile. To be told in some fashion, “you are important and worthwhile to God” in a world that has too often used its power to crush people, to make them feel useless and worthless. Isn't that, at least partly, why you come here – to experience the healing touch of a loving God made known through the fellowship of the Church?

If the Church is not a place of healing, a place where people can feel their lives touched, then where will that happen in society? I remain convinced that those congregations where such healing power is obvious and where folks share it, will grow and be blessed by God.

Second, we realize that to be disciples in the use of God's healing power is draining. It draws much energy from us and requires great inner resources, both material and emotional. Just as Jesus experienced the need for renewal, so that He could continue, so the Church needs to be in constant prayer. Our worship time, so relatively short in the course of a week, gives us opportunity to experience that renewal. Through prayer, through the sharing of God's Word, within the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ – whatever we do here is intended to strengthen us, to tap into the power of God as God shares it with us – and to empower us to be disciples in the community where we live.

We come seeking direction and guidance from God, to be led by the wisdom of the Holy One in our own decision-making. It is a very dangerous thing to consider what we want as being what God wants – rather we seek God’s will for our lives. Prayer gives us understanding what it is that God requires of us and how we might fulfill those expectations. When we say, “I think the church should do this”, is it our opinion, or is it a consequence of having been in prayer? When we say, “I will do this,” is it my will or God’s will? The strength God gives us is not energy to do “our” thing; rather it is directed to enable us to do God’s thing in the world. We are not empowered to go our own way, but will receive unlimited power to pursue what God wants in the world. This time of renewal in worship strengthens us specifically to follow the way of Christ.

Third, the Church follows the model of Jesus in realizing that there are many places where the Good News needs to be shared. Jesus knew that His ministry would soon wither if He stayed in Capernaum – it would have been comfortable and safe, but Jesus was not chosen to live out His life in security. And so it is with the Church as well – as the Body of Christ, the Church lives out its purpose, not by what happens within these walls, but by its impact outside the walls, in the community and the world. What happens within these walls, renewal and strengthening, healing and holiness, finds its fulfillment in how we live it out in the days between our time together. The Church is here to make a difference; the healing of brokenness experienced here is shared with those who cannot come themselves. The Church lives in mission, always at risk, seeking new opportunities to share the Good News with all people.

The model of Jesus Christ then becomes the pattern of the life of the Church:

For the Church uses the power of God, through which healing is experienced by all who are touched by the life of the Body of Christ.

For the Church is a place of renewal and strengthening to seek guidance and power to pursue God’s purpose in the world.

For the Church is always seeking and reaching out for new opportunities and new ways to share our experience of God in all places.

The Gospel writer Mark makes this clear at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, His approach to the task given by God. May it be our task as well. Amen.