

Fifth Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/B): "Carrying Our Loved Ones to Jesus"
Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; Mark 1:29-39
February 6-7, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Years ago we enjoyed wonderful dinner theater in Fellowship Hall. The one-woman play, "All That I Am," starred the actress Roberta Nobleman (who played Julian at one of our women's retreats). The menu was international, reflecting the national background of the women Ms. Nobleman portrayed. I don't remember the full menu, but I do recall the most important course, dessert! We had German chocolate cake in honor of Maria von Wedemeyer, the young fiancée of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man who was martyred at the end of World War II before he & Maria had a chance to walk down the aisle. Another person portrayed was Simon Peter's wife. Her role was largely a work of imagination, because we know nothing about her other than the fact she existed, deduced from this story about Jesus healing her mother. We don't know her name, we don't know how many children they had, we don't know what she said when her husband came home one day and announced he was shifting from being a **fisherman** to becoming a **fisher of men**, having accepted the invitation of an itinerant rabbi to follow Him. So Peter told the little woman he was gonna hit the road and would be in touch when he could. We can only **imagine** that her reaction wouldn't have been **all** that positive.

People lived in multi-generational households in those days, so Peter and the Mrs. probably lived under his in-laws' roof. 'Doesn't seem like a stretch that Peter's wife would share her unhappiness over her husband's imminent departure with her mother who wouldn't be thrilled about it either and who would now be looking daggers at her son-in-law. So I wonder... if Jesus' choice to heal Peter's mother-in-law of her fever was a gift to Peter as well as to his wife and her mother. Jesus' willingness and ability to cure the mother-in-law's fever would certainly cast both Peter **and** Jesus in a much more positive light!

In St. Luke's telling of the story, the fever was "high" (Luke 4:38). Sometimes it's referred to as "burning" (*The Message*). We're not talking 99 degrees. Maybe more like 103 or 104. Worrisome. Some guess the woman may have had malaria. There was no aspirin in those days, so people turned to other remedies, including one the Talmud prescribes: using a braid of hair to lash an iron knife to a bush, and over the course of 3 days reciting Exodus 3:2-5, the story about Moses and the burning bush which was engulfed in flame but not consumed. God speaks to Moses and commands him:

"Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5)

Peter's home became holy ground, too, because of the healing, saving presence of our Lord Jesus.

He came and took [the sick woman] by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. (Mark 1:31)

St. Luke uses stronger language:

... he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them. (Luke 4:39)

Jesus **rebuked** the fever, as He rebuked unclean spirits, wind and waves, all the manifestations of evil and chaos and the brokenness of creation.

It's always bothered me that the just-healed woman springs up and begins to make lunch. I used to think that cast her as a Stepford wife, and I wanted the others to insist she sit down and be served. (You know, brunch in bed on a nice little tray table, complete with hot meal and a rose; "So glad you're feeling better, take it easy!") But once again, I was wrong. Those who know a lot more than I say that she cares for the others out of **gratitude** not **servitude**. This is her way of thanking the Lord and paying forward His kindness. She delights in offering hospitality and is serving others in her role as a privileged head of the household, not as a second-class, Upstairs-Downstairs-type domestic servant. It's a good reminder for us that the spirit in which we serve

others is more important than the actions we perform. **No** task is menial if it is an expression of faith active in love.

The love the sick woman's family feels for her is shown in the urgency with which they tell Jesus about her illness, as soon as He enters their home for Sabbath lunch. She's sick and they've got a sense He can do something about it. After all, word was already traveling about how He'd cast a demon out of a man in the synagogue that same morning. Clearly this Jesus had some special power, some unique connection to God that could enable Him to help their loved one.

That's really what intercessory prayer is all about, right? We bring our loved ones before the Lord so He will bless them. Whether it's a prayer we pray by the bedside of a parent who's sick, or the prayer we pray as our child drives away in the car or flies away in a plane, the murmured, heartfelt request that our loved one pass a licensing exam or get the job, find a beloved of their own, or receive grace to get into recovery from whatever addiction is destroying them: we believe Jesus has power to save, as much as the folks in today's Gospel do. St. Mark tells us that at sundown they line up outside the door of Peter's mother-in-law's home, knowing that Jesus is inside, believing that Jesus can make whole what is broken. We've all seen pictures, videos, of massive lines of people waiting outdoors to get COVID vaccines. Zoom back 2,000 years and imagine each of those people accompanying somebody else on crutches, in a litter, slung over their shoulder, holding tightly to their hand, cradled in their arms, lashed to their back: the walking wounded and their advocates flocking like bees to honey, approaching Jesus, begging Jesus: "Lord, if You will, you can make us whole."

There's a card our Intercessory Prayer group sometimes sends to folks who ask our prayers for their loved ones. It says:

Intercessory prayer can penetrate the hearts of those we cannot open and shield those we cannot guard and teach where we cannot speak and comfort where our

hearts have no power to soothe. Prayer with its unseen hand can enter where we may not.

(The Scriptorium, #257, All Saints Convent, Catonsville, MD, 21228)

If we advertised that Jesus Christ Himself was going to be here for worship, how long would the line be of folks waiting to get in? Not just down the block, not just to the light at Route 71, not just to the beach.... There'd be boats lined up on the Atlantic, more than on July 4th to see the fireworks! Our neighbors, folks from near and far, wouldn't miss the opportunity to see Jesus, to ask Him to heal themselves or the loved ones they'd bring in person, if possible, or whom they'd show Him in photos or call on FaceTime. "Lord, here's [fill in the person's name who's on your heart and name their need]. Please, Lord, heal the disease, mend the broken bone or spirit, lift the depression, rebuke the addiction, cast out the despair, settle the mind, soften the heart...."

Jesus isn't visibly sitting here today as 1st century Jesus of Nazareth, but the risen Christ is here, all right. I know this because 2 or more of us are gathered in His name, and **He promised** to be with us whenever that happens. I know He is here because He **is** the living, incarnate Word who speaks through the written and preached Word of God. I know He is here because He said, "This is my body, this is my blood," then commanded us to **do** this to remember Him, and we **are** doing this to remember Him, and when we are able we are receiving Him in the blessed Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Our Lord Jesus is still present in power to heal and save His people. He's still receptive to those who intercede on behalf of loved ones. I was wondering why the folks in today's Gospel waited till sunset to bring their sick relatives and friends to Jesus. It's because they had to wait till the Sabbath was over to do the work of "carrying their burdens," literally carrying their loved ones to Jesus' door. No lighter burden in the world, though, than to bring a loved one to Jesus, even if

it's day in and day out, for years. Remember the image of one little fellow carrying an even smaller one? The caption is: "He ain't heavy, he's my brother."

Sometimes the ones in need of healing aren't able to get themselves where they need to go, literally or figuratively. They may need a lift in someone's car or they may need a lift from somebody else's faith. Peter's mother-in-law was bedridden. Others had to point the Lord toward her. The paralytic couldn't walk and the crowd was too great to carry him inside on his stretcher, so his friends hauled him up to the roof, dug a hole through it and lowered him on ropes, plopping him right at Jesus' feet. The centurion's servant was on his deathbed, so the centurion sent word to Jesus through a courier. Jairus' daughter had just about reached her expiration date, so her father sent a servant to beg Jesus to come. **We** can do that for those near and dear to us. In the middle of our intercessions, we are standing on holy ground no less than Moses was in front of the burning bush. We intercede to our Lord Jesus and He intercedes to the Father for us, serving as "our great High Priest," as the letter to the Hebrews says. Never doubt that our lives are in God's hands. Never doubt that our Lord Jesus, Son of God, Savior, is powerful to save us and our loved ones and those we do not love as we should. Hear the **present** truth in the *Celebrate* intro to today's Gospel:

Everywhere [Jesus] goes, he heals [the people] and sets them free. Disease, devils and death are running for their lives.

He **still** cures "sick bodies and tormented spirits." (Mark 9:34) Unlike the disciples, we don't have to "hunt" for Him (Mark 1:36). Seen through the eyes of faith, **He's right here** in Word, Sacrament and the community of faith.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

