

## WHEN YOU NEED A LIFT

5 Epiphany – B      February 4, 2018

Mark 1:29-39

Mark's gospel doesn't give us much time to stop and think, as it moves us so quickly through the story that it's almost hard to keep up. In today's gospel reading, we haven't even left the first chapter of the gospel; and already Jesus heals the sick mother-in-law of one of his disciples, heals crowds of sick people, and finally, ventures off alone to meditate and collect himself.

I totally understand his need to get away. Many of us who are servants of the gospel also crave times of solitude, so that the demands, the requirements of the call, can be placed on a back burner for a while.

To get a better grasp of the significance of this reading, let's look at it in context with the other texts appointed for this day. In all of our readings this morning there has been an emphasis that God is in control; and it is through God and in fellowship with one another that we find our freedom. It can happen because of us or in spite of us: that's not an insult, but an assurance. In that assurance even Jesus could walk away from a scene where people appeared to be left behind with unmet needs. God is in control. God has got this. So even when we have to step away from all of the unmet needs that torment us, God is still God; and that promise will help us accept our human limitations. We can't do it all. For you, for me, even for Jesus there comes a time to step away and trust God's power and God's compassion. Sometimes we have to remove ourselves from the chaos to see the bigger picture.

In our first reading from the book of Isaiah, the people of God are in exile, and they want their freedom to be who they are called to be, and to worship the one God, the One who made them "a people." They are tired, too. Tired of being in a foreign land; yet fearful of what it would mean to return to a homeland that many barely remembered or hardly knew. So their fear became despair. They were not longer sure what to do, where to go, and to whom they should be listening. Where they felt despair, they needed to hear words of hope. The prophet gave them words to comfort them with hope and direction. In the midst of their confusion, God was still in control.

In our reading from the letter to the church at Corinth, we hear the Apostle Paul instruct the people to be community within a community. Because relationship is so important, Paul has learned that it's important to know your audience, to find common ground, and even to learn from them. By showing that he knows their culture, as well as their strengths and weaknesses, Paul finds a way into that community because he has learned from them. He became many things to many people in order to build relationships on that common ground. When you speak to people in a language they can understand (i.e., what we can learn from each other, mutual respect) they will more readily hear and accept the message you bring. In other words, we try to reach people where they are (just as God meets us where we are.) That is mission. Rather than telling people that they must become like us, it is better to approach them on their level, understand their history and philosophy, and open up to learning from them, as well. Good News happens when those in mission learn from the community first, help them meet their needs; and by the works of their hands, show others what being servants of Jesus looks like. The Gospel is about community!

Finally, in our gospel reading Jesus heals Simon-Peter's mother-in-law of a fever, not simply so that she can serve them snacks or a meal, but in order to restore her ability to be hospitable—

which for her, is a ministry to Jesus and his friends. Perhaps you have read or heard this in the past and wondered, “Wait, Jesus restores her to health so she can be their servant for the evening?” No, Jesus helps her again feel whole again as her gift to her community. Jesus lifts her up, not for his or the others’ convenience, but so that she can feel whole again. He restores her sense of dignity.

Unfortunately, there are those who have used readings like this one to uphold a theological position that women were made to be servants and handmaidens to men. They might even claim that Jesus’ act of healing allowed to resume her proper tasks according to the order of creation, right?

The answer is a resounding “no.” Jesus did not heal her for the sake of waiting on him, or for the sake of the other disciples or guests in the house. Nor was simply a demonstration so others could “Look what God can do.” It was so much more. And it’s consistent with all of Jesus’ signs that focus on restoration to community. The blind, the lame, the lepers, and people with other afflictions were generally pushed to the outer edge of their community, where they were least likely to be noticed. This was the response of people who tended to view physical disabilities as God’s judgment. They were, at the least, considered unclean (think of the man last week with an unclean spirit), but generally were seen as outsiders or outcasts.

Jesus’ ministry was about restoring relationships. So in today’s reading, we sense his compassion: What can most bring wholeness to this house? Allowing the woman who delights in serving to be able to serve. And before we consider that a second-class calling, remember it is Jesus himself who will declare, nine chapters later in this gospel: “For the Son of Man came to not be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” [Mark 10:45]

But as word of Jesus’ healings got around, he became something of a folk hero. People heard that he had taken the hand of Peter’s mother-in-law and made her well, whole again. If he could help her, why not them, too? So they came, seeking healing, wholeness, and restoration. Mark tells us that Jesus “cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons....” But even the Son of God can be overwhelmed by constant demands. You who have served in this community or in other places where you have lived — you get what I mean: Sometimes the demands of caring for others become so great that, well, in the words of an old commercial, we need someone or something to “Take me away!” Jesus needed time away, time alone, time to think.

Relating this to my own observations and experiences, let me speak about something much closer to home. Brenda thoroughly enjoys being retired from teaching and being “Grandma” to Allison. But even grandmas become tired, stressed, and exhausted. So there are times when Grandma needs “Brenda time.” And that might even mean stepping out of the “community”—at least for a little while, in order to refocus on what it means *to be* community.

Sometimes, downtime has to happen in order to find restoration. So it was for Peter’s mother-in-law when she developed a fever, and Jesus took her hand and restored her. So it was also for Jesus, when he took time away to think and to pray. Even the people of God in exile who were physically “away” needed to step back and think about who they could be if they recommitted their trust in God who was with them always—even if it was away from their own territory. What they believed was the most dire situation they could be in didn’t have to define who they were. Because God still staked his claim in them.

In what seems like a lifetime ago, a fall from a ladder became a metaphor for downtime and restoration to me, forcing me not only to reassess my physical ability, but also to take a new look at who I was called to be emotionally and spiritually. It made me re-examine what family, relationships and the call to ministry meant in this new reality. I was reminded of the song: “I get knocked down, but I get up again.” But as the years have passed, I’ve been able to step back and see the bigger picture. What seemed like the worst thing that could ever happen ultimately transformed my life and my appreciation for community: at home, with family, and in my call as a servant of the gospel. So I sing a new song: one that would have been a good hymn, at least as I step back and reflect on God’s goodness, and God’s faithfulness: “I’m so glad Jesus lifted me” / “Satan had me bound, Jesus lifted me” / “When I was in trouble, Jesus lifted me, singing glory, hallelujah! Jesus lifted me.” [ELW 860]

Hear the Good News: When you need a hand, Jesus will be there to lift you, too. Amen.