



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Fremont, California

SERMON

8. February, 2009. Epiphany 5

Title: "Join Hands, Reach Out and Lift Up "

Text: St. Mark 1: 29-39

J.J.

Today's Gospel reading is one more of those snippets from St. Mark's Gospel that we have been reading throughout this Epiphany season . . . seven verses here . . . eight verses there . . . eleven verses today: a total of 35 verses over the past five Sundays. And, when one hears today's Gospel, along with continued readings from I Corinthians . . . well, frankly, the message this Sunday doesn't seem all that different from what we heard last Sunday: it's all about preaching and healing and the casting out demons, along with Paul's on-going struggles with the parish in Corinth—what more is there to say? Well, if we look a little more closely and listen a little more carefully, we will discover there's more here than what meets the eye or strikes our ears, and, as our own Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori points out in her own discernment of this text, this Word of God is calling us to "Join Hands, Reach Out and Lift Up" (Now, I'm not going to preach her sermon, but a copy of her sermon is available to you at the back of the Church and on our website). But, on this Sunday of our Annual Meeting, using her words, I want to invite us all to "Join Hands, Reach Out and Lift Up."

As I read the stories about healings in Scripture, especially the healing stories in Mark's Gospel, I am amazed at how often we hear that Jesus takes someone by the hand: reaches out and lifts them up. Today, it's Peter's mother-in-law: Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up. Next week, we will hear how Jesus stretches out his hand to the leper and heals him. And as we read on, we will hear story after story about Jesus laying his hands on someone and they become well, or touching someone and they are healed, or reaching out his hands in blessing, as in the blessing of the children. Thanks to our Presiding Bishop, the repetitious theme of joining hands, reaching out and lifting up caught my attention as something important for us to hear . . . as something important that God wants to say to us, especially today, here at St. James'.

Last Sunday, Dr. Michal Anne reminded us once again that we are living in a time of change. I loved her story about the woman posting "Prayer Changes Things" on the refrigerator door and her husband quickly takes it down, not because he doesn't like prayer, but because he's afraid of change. That really hit home for me. Like it or not, we are living in a time of dramatic change, not only here at St. James', but in our world, in our country, in our state, in our city (I was amazed to see that the Chevrolet dealership just down the street had closed its doors and everything gone almost overnight), in our churches (at the denominational level as well as in the local parish), in our homes and in our families . . . and quite frankly, it does get scary at times. We are living in a time of great uncertainty. And yes, there are times when I, and I suspect you, are just a little frightened by it all. The problem is, our fears can, and often do, affect how we live and how we act, and that is especially true for us, here at St. James', today, as we come together for our Annual Meeting to decide some important issues, as we select new leaders, and as we continue our transition process, trying to discern what God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do. What I hear today's Gospel calling us to do,

however, is this: “Join Hands, Reach Out and Lift Up.” Jesus came, took Simon’s mother-in-law by the hand, lifted her up, and she began to serve them. Life went on!

Now, I do not want to minimize that change can be, and often is, very frightening. I’m sure Simon Peter’s mother-in-law was quite frightened when she came down with whatever it was that brought on the fever and made her bed ridden. That’s scary. And even Simon Peter himself, runs scared, looking here, there and everywhere for Jesus, who had simply gone for a walk so he could pray. Today’s Gospel reads like the game we use to play as kids—“hide and go seek”—you know, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100 . . . here we come, ready or not. And notice, when they at last find him, they exclaim: “Where have you been? Everyone’s been searching for you.” But Jesus, Jesus just steps back quietly into their lives, calms their fears, and says to them: “Come on. Let’s get going. We’ve got work to do . . . to proclaim God’s message . . . to do what God is calling us to be and to do” . . . So, “Join Hands, Reach Out and Lift Up.”

And that’s God’s message to you and to me this day—“Join Hands, Reach Out and Lift Up.” Indeed, change, and our fear of it, can affect us, and often in an adverse way. Our fear of change can impair our judgments and our decisions. Our fear of change can at times make us say things we do not want to say, and do things we do not want to do. Our fear of change can immobilize us. Our fear of change can compel us to return to the “good old days” (whenever and whatever those days were), rather than to embrace and celebrate the future. Well, let me assure you, our future does not reside in our past; Our future is in God’s hands. And just so we don’t forget that, Jesus comes to us, today, here, and now, in bread and wine, present with us, and says to us: Let’s get going. We’ve got work to do . . . to proclaim God’s message . . . to do what God is calling us to be and to do” . . . So, “Join Hands, Reach Out and Lift Up.” Amen.

S.D.G.

The Rev. Dr. David E. Abernethy-Deppe
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“Join Hands, Reach Out, and Lift Up”

The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori

Based on St. Mark 1:29-39

5th Sunday after the Epiphany

February 08, 2009

I had news recently of the death of a friend's brother-in-law. He was a 60-year old Viet Nam War vet, a man possessed by the demons of war, until he was finally released in death. The last several decades of his life were filled with midnight terrors and round-the-clock attempts at self-medication. As I wrote his family, I prayed that his wounded life might be resurrected in the healing of God's ultimate grace. There are increasing numbers of haunted souls like him, each in need of healing.

Healing the sick and similarly possessed was a central part of Jesus' earthly ministry. His gift of physical and spiritual healing restored human beings to full participation in their communities. Healing and deliverance from pain and illness is a hallmark of the great prophetic dream called the Reign of God, where no one goes hungry, the ill and grieving are healed, and those in various kinds of prisons are set free for abundant life. Over and over again in the gospels we hear that Jesus "went about healing many who were sick or possessed by demons." It is a foundational image of the work we share as his followers.

When Jesus went to Simon's house, he had just come from healing a man like that veteran. Simon's mother-in-law was sick with a fever, and Jesus walked over, took her by the hand, and "raised her up." That same word for raised or lifted up is used on Easter morn -- "he is not here, he is risen" -- but it is also used of Jesus being lifted up on the cross. Simon Peter's mother-in-law is raised up from her illness, and what does she do? She begins to minister, to serve. She is the first active witness to what a resurrected life in Jesus looks like. At baptism, we too are raised into a new life of service or ministry to others and acknowledge that ministry is a matter of lifting up our crosses daily.

We may not know her name, but the mother of Simon's wife is a model for our own servant ministry. Touched and healed by Jesus, she becomes minister of healing herself. She gets up from her bed and presumably begins to feed people, as any good Jewish housewife of the day would do for her son in law and his honored guests.

The very next encounter that Jesus has in Mark's gospel is also about touching and healing someone -- this time a leper. The leper is told to keep quiet about his healing, but he can't do it -- he has to tell the world. The upshot is that Jesus can't even enter a town without being besieged. The world is desperate for healing. Like the street outside Simon's mother-in-law's home, the streets out there are also filled with the sick and possessed, each one eager to be made whole.

The touch of a hand can heal, restore life, and exorcise our demons as well. Michelangelo used that powerful image of life-giving touch when he pictured creation as God reaching out a hand to Adam, offering life. We often say that Christians are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. How do our hands serve as instruments of healing, and help to raise others to new life?

Simon's mother-in-law gets up and serves a meal. Food and feasting and the heavenly banquet are central images of a healed creation. The Good Samaritan ensures that the robbery victim he lifts up and takes to an inn is provided with food and drink for healing. The resurrected Jesus shares breakfast on the beach with his grieving and dispirited disciples. You and I have abundant opportunities to feed the hungry – through soup kitchens, reformed farm policies, and development that helps people around the globe to grow nutritious and affordable food.

The touch of healing is obviously about caring for those with physical illness. Our hands may be put to healing work in literally tending the sick, infirm, or housebound, but, equally importantly, ensuring that all members of the community have access to medical care. Our hands may serve in the voting booth or the sickroom.

Hands can also heal psychic illness. My friend's brother-in-law had the demon called "no hope." He didn't meet the needed hand of healing in this life; we pray that the good shepherd hands that led him home will bind up his wounds. Yet we see others who do find the needed touch of weal, whether in a person who will sit and listen to the pain behind the war stories or the searching hands and eyes that will take a fallen comrade to shelter or hospital.

Hands may provide hope in surprising ways. I visited a congregation in Florida recently which has for many years been host to an Ethiopian Orthodox community, nearly all of them refugees. That community worshiped with us on a Sunday morning, and shared a joyful telling of the story of Israel going down into Egypt and being led out by the hand of God. That was what we were told before the story began; and as the chanting started, we may not have understood the words, but we did hear and see the liberation of that journey to freedom. During the lengthy singing a young woman beat the rhythm of the tale on a large and powerful drum, three feet across and five feet long. She alternated between loud booming beats on the large end and staccato conversation on the small end. Her hands held the whole of the singing group together. Those who sat in the congregation accompanied her with complex clapping rhythms and hula-like movements of their hands. Together a varied and disparate group of hundreds formed one whole, focused on the power of God to lead us into wholeness and holiness.

Where have you met the healing hand of God? Where has that hand, gloved in human flesh, reached out to lift you up? Maybe that hand has fed you or soothed your troubled and fevered brow. Perhaps that hand has even shaken you to greater wakefulness, to notice the lonely soul or the suffering mob in the street outside.

Jesus' healing touch was grounded in open vulnerability. He received the yearning masses, healing as many as he could. He taught the crowds about the present reality of God's reign, breaking in all around them, and he offered hope. He silenced the demons who would cry out that there is no hope. He formed disciples by letting them try the work themselves, even though they frequently failed. He held himself open to whatever and whomever the day presented, even the terror of execution at the hands of an occupying government. His service was one of constant lifting up, in the face of forces that would tear down.

Will you let yourself be taken by the hand and lifted up? Where and how will you join hands, reach out, and lift up others to healing? For, indeed, as Simon and his companions said to Jesus when they found him at prayer, "everyone is searching for" that physician of hope.

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

Let us pray. O God, your loving hand has made us in your own image, given us all we possess, and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: reach out your hand again and heal us, that we may respond in kind, offering your hope and healing to all who are broken in body or spirit, that together we may be your whole and healed and holy Body on this earth. This we pray in the name of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.