

**A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 8, 2015**

**Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, VA**

**By David H. Knight, Interim Rector**

In the Name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*“When Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her...” Mark 1”29-31*

Throughout the Scriptures there are references again and again about healings that have happened as the result of touching. In today’s gospel reading Jesus came and took Simon’s mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up. As he did so, the fever left her and she became well. Elsewhere, we hear of the raising of Jairus’s daughter. We hear of the blind man whose sight was restored when Jesus touched his eyes and spoke to him. Time after time the Scriptures point to the power of touching as a metaphor for the presence of healing and for the importance of relationships that bring healing. Some theologians even maintain that to be created in the image of God means that we are created to be in relationship, for as it is written in the Book of Genesis, “it is not right that human beings should be alone.” Scientists and psychologists have made the connection between human contact and healing, and that without human contact of a meaningful and tangible positive nature, people suffer.

Etched in my brain is the memory of the morning I made a hospital visit to a man who was suffering from a serious wound to his left hand that required delicate and skillful yet painful treatment. I remember walking into his room. At his bedside was the hospital chaplain whose name was Margaret Wise. Her name was appropriate. She had much wisdom and she was very skillful and compassionate. Both Margaret and the patient invited me to come in and join them. As I stood there observing all the signs I could of what was taking place at that moment, I became aware that the young man was not only in pain but he was for some reason visibly afraid. It turned out that at any moment the doctor was due to walk in and perform a procedure that he knew was going to be painful. Margaret, the chaplain, was calmly inviting him to share his fear. I noticed that he was gently holding his right hand. In a few moments, the doctor, an orthopedic hand specialist, entered the room. The young man’s fear became even more obvious even though he was making every effort to be brave. As the doctor began

to perform a procedure on his left hand, Margaret gently took into her hand his right arm. She invited him to think about doing something he loved to do and to describe what it would be like to be doing that right now. She asked him to describe details of that place. It became clear that she was gently trying to help him focus on something that would take his attention away to a good place. He began to tell her about a time and place when he was remembering riding his bicycle down a steep hill in Berkeley, California and feeling the wind in his face as his bicycle reached 52 miles per hour! She continued asking him for descriptions and details all the time while she was gently stroking his right arm. The transformation in that man's countenance from fear to a sense of calm became clearly obvious. Meanwhile the doctor was performing the procedure on his injured hand. By the time his bicycle trip was over, the doctor had finished the procedure. I remember his saying to the doctor, "That really didn't hurt after all!" I have never forgotten what happened in that room as Chaplain Margaret Wise spoke gently to and touched the other arm of a young man who was experiencing anxiety and fear. God's healing touch was present that day in that hospital room.

"Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her." The power of touch, the power of having someone near us, the power of a compassionate human being there with us when we are in need of healing is something that Jesus knew and understood. That power of touch is something that we too often may be slow to comprehend. God knew from the beginning the human need for nearness. That is the reason for the incarnation, the very presence of Jesus who came among us as a person. Jesus is the incarnation of God's love. In that hospital room that day, the healing presence of Jesus himself was present in the compassion of that hospital chaplain. It was present in her as a person who understood the power of touch, of nearness of another human being that was what it took to bring a sense of calm to one in need of healing at that moment.

Healing takes many forms, not all of which, as you and I know, necessarily result in physical recovery, but rather can and do bring peace and comfort helping to make it possible for a person to face what he or she has to face with peace and even with comfort. We cannot underestimate the power of God's healing touch and that you and I can be vessels ourselves of that healing. It might even be that for some people you and I may be the only Jesus that they will meet that day.

One more image is etched in my memory. Some years ago I was to meet with my spiritual director, Bob Moody, then rector of Grace Church in Alexandria and later Bishop of Oklahoma. That day, he and I were going out for lunch and were standing in line at a bank where Bob wanted to get some cash. As we stood there an angry customer in front of us was making it very difficult for the teller who was new at her job. When Bob approached the window, she was visibly shaken and apologized. Bob simply put his hand on hers as she handed him the cash. He calmly reassured her that what had happened just now was not about her but was about angry customer. His gentle voice with that gentle human touch brought a visible change in her whole countenance. She said, "Thank you, Sir, you make me feel much better." God's healing presence was there at that bank window that day.

Last Sunday in our adult forum conversation, Harrison spoke of this Epiphany season as a season that calls us to focus upon what our individual call in answer to God might be. God's call comes to us in many ways each and every day. This coming week, each of us will have a chance in some way to respond to God's call to us at some moment in some circumstance. And that response could be in the form of something quite simple. You and I might be called to be vessels of God's healing power to someone we encounter. That response could be a blessing to that person, and it will be a blessing to us as well.