

Mark 1: 29-39

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - February 7, 2021

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What's the best gift you've ever been given? Really think about that question for a moment, what's the best, most meaningful gift you've ever received? I'm sure that each of us would answer that question a bit differently, imagining the gift we dearly treasured. But even though our answers to that question vary widely, I'm willing to venture that what made the gift so meaningful was how personal it was.

There are certainly endless kinds of gifts in the world, and our gospel text for today also showcases a uniquely personal gift exchange.

As Jesus enters Simon and Andrew's home, he immediately goes to Simon's mother-in-law who is sick with a fever. Jesus goes to her, holds her hand, lifts her up, and gives her a wonderful gift, he heals her of the fever she has been plagued with. Through this healing, Jesus has given Simon's mother-in-law the gift of new life. She is freed from the potentially deadly fever, Jesus literally lifts her to her feet, and in this tender moment, she is restored.

Last week too, we heard of Jesus doing a healing, but it was in the synagogue, the public arena, but this week Jesus' actions are more private, he literally heals this woman in her son-in-law's living room. It's a very personal moment in which Simon's mother-in-law is given this gift of new life.

But this gift-giving by Jesus is only one part of the story.

As word spreads about the power Jesus has to heal, the whole town shows up at Simon's doorstep. Everyone pressing in to try and get first in-line to receive this gift of healing from Jesus. Scripture tells us that Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.

Now before we start to think Jesus just hands out healings like Oprah hands out cars, says "you get a healing" "you get a healing" "You get a healing" We need to stop and think about what is Jesus' goal here? What's his mission? Jesus' mission is to bring people to new life, Jesus' mission is to free people from what binds them, Jesus' mission, both through his healing and his preaching is to give people freedom. The freedom to live without illness, the freedom that comes in knowing they are loved by God, the new life that comes with knowing forgiveness. Freedom that comes from deeper relationship with God.

That is a powerful gift, one that Jesus gives, and gives, and continues to give throughout all of history. Jesus himself, is the very embodiment of God's love powerfully bestows that gift.

And in speaking of gifts, I'd like to share with you the story of a time when I was given a very meaningful gift. An important part of the seminary process is something called Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE for short. There's a variety

of CPE programs that one can do, but typically it means a few months spent serving as a hospital chaplain. I served as a chaplain for a summer at UNC Rex Healthcare in Raleigh, North Carolina. In preparation for this summer of unique ministry, I prepared as much as I could. I read books on pastoral care, sought tips and advice from senior seminarians, got comfortable shoes to traverse all over the hospital at all hours of the day. As I started my first week at the hospital, I was nervous, to be sure, but I felt as ready as I could be.

Part of our orientation in the first week, was a trip to the Employee Health department, to ensure we had a TB test and all the proper vaccinations. No big deal I thought, I turned that immunization paperwork in months ago, I'm all good to go! Well, not so fast, I found out. I was missing one vaccination, for the chicken pox. I was surprised given I had a bad case of the chicken pox as a child, but nevertheless, I needed this immunization and to make a long story short, because I didn't have this shot, I couldn't see patients. One can't very well be a hospital chaplain if they can't see patients. Not being able to see patients means that I could not complete the program. This would mean that I would not move forward in the seminary process. It seems like such a small matter, in retrospect, but this literally put my whole seminary trajectory and timeline up in the air. I worried about what internship opportunities I would have, I wondered if my scholarships would be in jeopardy.

I was shocked, I was frustrated, and honestly I was at a loss of what to do as the hospital administration decided what to do about my case. Overcome with the emotion over the stress of it all, I found an empty table in the cafeteria courtyard to sit and attempt to collect myself, though it wasn't long before the tears welling up in my eyes spilled over again.

As I quietly kept crying and wiping my eyes, a woman approached me. It was a middle aged woman who's name tag said she was a nurse named Pat. Nurse Pat said she could see that I had been crying and wanted to know what was going on. I started to explain my situation through my tears, as she patiently listened. As I finished muddling through my story, Nurse Pat said, "Can I pray for you?" I said yes, and Nurse Pat prayed with me and for me with the most comforting and reassuring words.

I honestly can't even remember the exact words that she said, but I remember the feeling of comfort and a peace that surpasses all understanding that washed over me as she prayed. Even now years,

I may have signed up to be a hospital chaplain, but it was Nurse Pat who simply and powerfully ministered to me that day. Nurse Pat couldn't fix my problems, but she could meet me in that moment and free me from the fear and anxiety I was feeling. She reminded me that I was not alone, and that whatever happened, God would be with me.

Fortunately, I found out later that week that I would be able to complete the CPE program, my seminary process continued, uninterrupted. I never saw Nurse Pat again, but I will never forget the gift she gave me. The gift of her time, the gift of her presence, the gift of her faith. The way God's love poured out through her to me, in a time of need.

God's love is a gift, the greatest of gifts that can be shown, given, poured out in an endless variety of ways. It's a gift that lifts us up, a gift that frees, and a gift that calls us to new life.

In our gospel text, after she has been given the gift of healing, Simon's mother-in-law goes about her own gift giving, Scripture tells us that after her fever leaves her, she immediately begins serving Jesus and the other guests in her household. Our modern perspective might lead us to think, goodness gracious, she just gets over this fever and she's expected to get to making dinner? But this is her way of gift-giving, her way to go about living in thanksgiving for the gift of new life given to her.

And in that way, I believe this story is a powerful reminder to us this morning. First, it's important to hear that Jesus meet us where we're at, just as we are. It's really cool to hear a healing story that takes place in a living room, when we've all been worshipping from our living room couches, and our kitchen tables for awhile now.

Jesus brings to us, new life, forgiveness. Jesus, through his life, death, and resurrection assures us that we are loved, we are forgiven, and we are called. We are called to live lives of thankful response. Of course we can never do enough to “repay” God for all what we have been given, but we can commit, and recommit our lives to living out God’s mission. To live lives that pour out God’s love to others, to see how we can be a Nurse Pat to someone else. For in doing this, in strive to share God’s love through our words and our deeds, we share in the greatest gift of love the world has ever know, Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.