

Epiphany V Year B 2024

Back in October our son James lost his job. His firing really came out of the blue. Naturally, it was a traumatic event in the life of his family; for his wife Corey, and their children. They have a mortgage, bills to pay, credit card debt.... The uncertainty of it all. But to their credit they didn't yield to despair. Corey got a part time job in an insurance office; and James decided that he'd drive most every day for Uber.... For those who may not know, Uber is what I would call an amateur taxi service, managed and expedited on the internet. It's when your wife does something with her phone and a car shows up. James figured if he could average one hundred fifty to two hundred dollars a day, they could make ends meet until he found another chef's job. Thanks be to God he has now found another job; one he is really excited about, but the experience has been eye-opening to say the least. He shuttles people from all walks of life; people from all over the world, now that Austin has become an international city. Some passengers say nothing as they travel; some merely scroll through the data on their phone as they sit in the back seat. And then there are some who share a bit of their lives with him. Some ask James about his.

James called me just the other day, a morning after a long day of driving clients to their various destinations in Austin. He said he had one client, a young

woman who was going to rehab for alcohol abuse. He arrived at her modest apartment, and she was waiting at her door with a suitcase. A young man was with her. James guessed he was her brother. They hugged before she got into his car. She reeked of alcohol; she was dazed and sullen; but functioning, as alcoholics learn to be from habit. She was thin, lost in her clothes, and at her wits end. James said he felt a welling up of sadness in his body. They exchanged very few words, but hearing James tell the story, I could tell that there was a deep connection to this stranger. James said he realized that every life is just as hard and complicated as his own; that every life has, like his, epic proportions, tragic, and comic, an odyssey unto itself... he said he could almost feel her suffering. He said that for two months he has had the privilege of getting an intimate glimpse into the lives of others; a glimpse onto the mystery of what it means to be human. On this planet there are billions of other worlds represented by the lives of others... but in truth there is only one life that we humans share... one life... one collective soul of kindred and contingent souls. We know another's suffering because we know our own. If we're paying attention, we have compassion for those who are lost in the dark, because we know our own darkness.

I've been thinking a lot about our conversation, and it strikes me that James was called to participate in this woman's healing. He was taking her to rehab,

after all... but more than that he was present... present to her suffering. I think that is what the Way of Jesus is all about. It is not about getting the belief system right; it's not about self-improvement, becoming a so-called better person, "the best version of oneself," according to contemporary parlance. It is about being present to the suffering of others. In our reading from Mark today, Jesus begins in earnest his ministry. In just a few short verses, Jesus has been baptized; had his trial in the desert; called his disciples, and now his ministry is in full swing. His ministry, in short, is the ministry of the baptized. That is the central theme of this Gospel. Jesus is the model for all of us. We are to heal, to welcome, to do justice, but not in some herculean, earth shaking gesture... but by one encounter, one moment at the time... soul to soul; because one person's healing is healing for the whole.

In our reading Jesus heals Simon Peter, the disciple's mother-in-law, we are told. The writer says that Jesus took her by the hand and "lifted her up." The word in the Greek for "lifted" is *egerin*, which is the same root word for resurrection. That, to say the least, is worth noting. That word is shot through this terse Gospel. There are, in fact eight other instances, accounts of healing, in this Gospel in which the same word is used: The raised paralytic, Jairus's daughter, the man with the withered hand, among others. And ironically, at the end of this

Gospel, quite contrary to the other three, there is no resurrection appearance. Only a young man dressed in white, pointing to Galilee, the place of Jesus's ministry; telling the disciples to meet Jesus there. Could it be that Mark is saying that resurrection is not some magical occurrence marking the finale of Jesus's life and ministry; but that it is a reality in our daily lives manifest in our healing presence to each other? I would say that our very vocation is to bear resurrection life to those given us... and that requires presence; proximity, as the great Brian Stevenson, puts it.

And here's the thing: healing is more than about our emotions and our bodies. Healing is also about community. Mark tells us that immediately after her healing, Peter's mother-in-law begins serving the household. She is restored to her community, reclaimed into the circle of fellowship, from the isolation that suffering causes. Healing is always for the collective soul of us all. When one is isolated through suffering, then we all suffer.

Mark has woven together tightly the two themes of baptism and resurrection. Resurrection is the vocation of the baptized; resurrection meaning the restoration and renewal of lives that are lost to indignity and suffering. Resurrection is less about raising the physically dead to life; and much more about

raising to new life those who live in the shadows of suffering and a life dead to possibility and hope. T.S. Eliot called it death in life: People living as if they were dead. Our calling is to raise the dead of our world to a life resonant with hope and possibility, meaning and purpose. At the raising of each soul, the world is made new. We are creators, re-creators of the world, brothers and sisters. And presence is the means. Love is at the heart of this mystery, and Love can only be engendered by presence. And Love requires the denial of self, and the recognition that each life we encounter is as valuable as our own. Love requires humility and honesty, and compassion... and courage. Our gathering Sunday after Sunday is to engender in our heart of hearts such virtues. Resurrection, the very renewal of our world, is a present reality; or shall I say, the reality of presence. We bear in our very bodies the mystery of God's kingdom come, in earth as it is in heaven. And that reality speaks of our true humanity. We are not a fallen people; we bear the healing presence of God.

Jesus himself practiced the ministry of presence. His story embodies the mystery of empathy and compassion. He was present not only to the least and the lost of his world, but he was present to the powers that be; present to the oppressive predisposition of the status quo. He offered in word and deed, by his presence, an alternative way of life. A way of life in which all were equals; in

which there are no outcasts; in which welcome and hospitality were the chief rubrics by which to live. He spoke otherwise to the narrative of elitism and power. His presence on the cross was testimony to the horrors of institutional power, of military might, of government that preys on the poor for the opulence of the rich. Things have not changed: Our own government, the powers that be in our contemporary world... our context; our government is funding the genocide in Gaza; our government is paying lip service to the environmental crisis relative to climate change. Native Americans and Black Americans are still treated as second, excuse me, third class citizens. Immigrants, the life blood of our culture, are now scapegoats to our dysfunction. Our capitalist economy that wields great influence upon our elected officials is widening the gulf between rich and poor. 40% of our population live below the poverty line, while one percent of our population controls the majority of our nation's wealth. Firearms designed to kill people efficiently and on a mass scale proliferate in every U.S. City, uncontrolled. These are matters contradictory to the Gospel of Jesus. And we are the witnesses to such deadly contradiction. The church in the post-modern west is dying because the church has been complicit with the status quo... it has been expedient for us to remain silent for centuries, but our silence is killing us. The world needs our

presence, good people. We must challenge the narratives of falsehood with the truth. Our presence is witness to the truth.

The bottom line to the Gospel of Christ is that the lives of the suffering matter, and that their suffering is our suffering. We are called to have open hearts to the suffering of our world... in our neighborhoods, across town, in our jails and prisons, in underfunded schools. I think it might be so simple as to reach out your hand and raise one up who is lost and low. We are called to participate in the healing of our world... to participate in the world's resurrection. It is all about presence.... Simple presence.