

**Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**February 8, 2009**

Epiphany 5B 2009

In the name of our one ever calling God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Prophet Isaiah is in captivity in Babylon with his people. He is coping with the despair of the people who believe their God has abandoned them and that their lives are hopeless and meaningless. Here, the prophet speaks in God's voice answering them. First he puts them in their place: I am the one who stretched out the heavens; I sit above the earth and to me you people are like grasshoppers; I raise up and cast down princes and great empires. Then the Lord asks in effect, who are you to tell me who I am and what I can and cannot do! What I will and will not do!

Then, in a still somewhat irritated voice, God offers them hope: I don't faint or grow weary; I am the One who gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. God promises that those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength and mount up with wings like eagles and not grow weary and faint. In this most poetic language, the prophet gives words to an improbable truth – the connection between infinity and intimacy. The Creator is so great, so different that God is beyond our ability to comprehend. Even so, the Creator desires relationship and intimacy with us. The Creator is a God who wants to make us whole, who seeks to empower the faint and strengthen the powerless.

In today's Gospel lesson we find Jesus leaving the synagogue in Capernaum after the Sabbath service where he had "taught as one having authority and not as one of the scribes." Jesus reinforced that impression by healing a man with an unclean spirit by calling the spirit out from the man. For Jesus, teaching and healing go always together. They reinforce one another. For Jesus, miracles are subordinate to his ministry. Unlike faith healers of his times, Jesus uses healings to point to God's power and compassion and to underscore his own authority as the Son of God.

Leaving the synagogue on the Sabbath, Jesus enters Peter's house to hear that Peter's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Jesus went to her, took her by the hand and lifted her up. The fever left her and she could resume her place in the household by serving them food and drink. This simple act of healing is remarkable in a number of ways. First, it concerns a woman that was probably one of the most insignificant and powerless people in the village according to the culture. Not only was she an old woman but she was living in her son-in-law's house. That meant she had no husband and no sons to care for her. Peter had no obligation to take her in; if he hadn't she'd be in a desperate situation. Secondly, it was done by touch. Men in that culture did not touch woman outside of their own immediate family. We'll see that a lot of Jesus' healings involve his touching of people that the culture and religion of his times would disapprove of and condemn. Finally, it was done on a Sabbath – tending the sick on a Sabbath was viewed by the Pharisees as a violation of God's command to rest on the Sabbath. By the simple act of a healing touch of Peter's mother-in-law Jesus is demonstrating not only his healing power but also his authority over the Law and the culture.

We next see that after sunset ends the Sabbath, the villagers brought all their sick to be healed. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds, we ask how was this done or did this really happen? We put the emphasis on the illness or disability. That really involves curing. Healing goes beyond curing and deals with social relationships – the effects of a disease or disability in terms of the person’s sense of self, his or her dislocation, social isolation or perceived religious purity. In first century Jewish culture, many diseases made one ritually impure and separated the victim from the community. By healing, especially by touch, Jesus both asserted his authority and ended the healed the person’s isolation. He truly brought them into wholeness out of unwholeness, into relationship and community out of isolation.

Finally, Jesus goes to an isolated spot to pray. When his disciples come to get him saying everyone is looking for him, Jesus resists the temptation to settle down into the role of healer in Capernaum. His ministry is to go out into the world, to engage it and bring God’s compassion and healing power to all.

I think there are some important lessons for us in this story:

1. Contemplation and action go together; neither is sufficient by itself. Our prayer life and worship lead to discerning God’s will as to how to bring wholeness to a broken world – that then leads to action.
2. Teaching and healing go together – one reinforces the other.
3. To bring wholeness to the world, we have to go into the world and engage it. We have to touch those who have been isolated or are powerless. We have to be vulnerable and love those who disagree with us. We have to be willing to tolerate the creative tension between peace and justice – to speak for justice and yet love those who oppose us.

Church is the Body of Christ in the world and we are called to do in Lahaina as Jesus did in his ministry in Galilee and Judea. Our meals-on wheels teams bring not only food but healing to our kapuna. No, we can't cure their diseases, but we do touch them and end, however briefly, their sense of isolation and woundedness.

This parish has this year been a founding sponsor of F.A.C.E. of Maui- an ecumenical faith based grass roots organization meant to give voice and power to the people of this island who need affordable housing, better jobs and better schools.

Our vestry recently went on public record by giving testimony to the Hawaiian House Judiciary Committee in support of HB 444 to create civil unions for our gay and lesbian fellow citizens. It is posted on the bulletin board on the rear wall. There are people who disagree with that and that's OK. However, the vestry and I believe that it is our ministry to bring healing and wholeness not only to those directly affected by such legislation but to the whole society that for whatever reason has chosen to isolate and lessen some of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our ministr as Church is Christ's ministry of healing, of bringing wholeness out of unwholeness. Our job as a Church is to reach out with God's compassion to touch in need of God's healing touch. Compassion and the fight for social justice can go together – that's what Jesus' ministry was all about. He did create tension and opponents who crucified him – but, as Isaiah prophesied, God always has the last word. God alone decides what God will and will not do.

Amen.