

**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany + February 4, 2018**

Simon Peter's mother-in-law lay sick in bed with a fever. Jesus touches her, takes her by the hand and lifts her back into health and wholeness. As soon as this happens, the word gets out and the word spreads like wildfire. So, later that evening, those in need of healing come to Jesus. In fact, the inhabitants of the whole city gather at the door. Longing for wholeness and healing, they want to be touched by Jesus.

When Jesus heals the sick and exorcises demons, he is performing "signs and wonders." These signs and wonders show that the Kingdom of God has broken into the world – broken into troubled lives, fractured relationships, and poisoned systems. They testify to the in-breaking of God's Kingdom

Well, here we are again. The city of Seattle hasn't converged upon our doorstep but there are plenty of us here because we long for healing and we want to be touched by Jesus. And Jesus does not disappoint us.

Among the many signs and wonders in this gathering are the healing prayers offered each Sunday. You may receive the healing prayers before or after receiving the bread and the cup. A healing prayer minister is seated at the entrance to the chapel and you are free to make specific requests or say nothing at all. Either way, the pattern is predictable and trustworthy – the healing prayer minister lays his or her hands on the person asking for prayer, speaks words of prayer, and then traces the sign of the Cross of the forehead with the sacred oil using these or similar words: "Receive this oil as a sign of God's healing and forgiveness."

We pray for healing of body, mind, and spirit and the touch of the hands and the anointing with oil and it is nothing less than the touch of God.

There are others signs and wonders. Earlier, Pastor Van Kley announced the absolution when she said, "Your sins are forgiven." These words alone are enough to release our demons and heal the sin sick soul. A prayer or a hymn or a piece of music can provide sweet comfort and stir the soul to deeper faith. In the sharing of the Peace, the Risen Christ touches us in a most human way and we are fed by Christ's hand at the Table.

Signs and wonders. God is among us. The Kingdom has broken in. And the promise is that these wonders spill out into the world but some days we wonder if the promise has really come true.

I confess that I wondered about it all this past week. All things considered, it was a heavy week. I know a bunch of people who got this terrible flu bug that's been going around that we're told not even the flu shot could have prevented. We received the news that one of our sisters here in the parish has a bad cancer spreading throughout her body. Britt and I visited with a friend who described his weakened heart condition. And lunch with another friend included some pretty

honest sharing of unresolved grief. And to top it all off, there's the daily news of disasters, famines, crimes and, some days; it just seems to me that the demons have taken over the folks in power.

In times like these I ask God, "Where are you? What am I missing?"

Maybe I'm over-thinking or just trying too hard to fit the things of God into my own expectations. Signs and wonders? Where and to what end?

Here is the curious thing about Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. He performs signs and wonders all right but he doesn't want the news to go public. Several times, after healing people or casting out demons, he swears them to silence.

Most of the time, the people sworn to silence tell others anyway. Still, Jesus commands silence as when he makes the leper clean and says: "See that you say nothing to anyone," or when Jesus opens the ears of the deaf man and orders those who have witnessed it to tell no one. Jesus even silences the demons who know very well what he is up to.

Jesus wants to keep these things silent because the last thing he wants is the reputation of being a magician. He is not. And he is not Shaman or a medicine man. The healings and exorcisms are not meant to dazzle crowds. Jesus does them because he is moved by pity but they are not to be glamorized.

The signs and wonders are not ends in themselves but point to the bigger picture of what God is doing through Jesus who has come to do more than mend broken bodies. He has come to mend a broken world, to restore people to a place of dignity, to replace the powers of evil with the power of God's grace to reconcile the world to God. The miracles alone aren't the whole picture and to idolize them is to fail to see the full scope of God's healing work.

So, I wonder if the signs and wonders, visible when we gather for worship, are actually quite hidden in the day-to-day world. I wonder if the transforming work of God occurs in ways we least expect and the places where, at least I fail I fail to look.

Several years ago, a friend got very sick. He received a diagnosis of cancer and four months later died. My friend was an old seminary classmate and maybe a year or two older than me. I remember feeling that the illness did not make sense. I grimace still over tragic endings and lives that end too quickly. This one brought me to a place not all that different that how I felt the past week.

Britt and I were among those who journeyed with Todd in the final weeks of his life. We visited him and together we laughed, cried and prayed. I remember praying often that this horrible disease would leave Todd's body. That prayer, it seemed, was never answered but something else happened during those weeks, something very holy.

First, some back-story - Todd felt a lot of displacement in his life and that's what he experienced big time with the church. Todd served as a parish pastor for maybe ten year and then, filled with hurt and anger and a deep sense of disillusionment, he resigned his call and left the ministry. Then he left the church all together. In the years that followed he was filled with resentment and bitterness. In his final months, a pastor from a local parish began to visit him and over time, he warmed up to the church's presence again in his life. I was also apparent that some other things were happening. I began to see his cynicism wane and the anger dissipate and a truer and more humble soul begin to emerge.

When several of us gathered for a ritual around his bedside, it was a service of reconciliation. Several of us, representing the voice of the church, named the ways we had hurt Todd and asked for forgiveness. Then, Todd did the same thing. He spoke of how he had wronged the church and then asked for forgiveness. Then the absolution was declared. Hands were layer upon him. We prayed. He was anointed with the oil. We shared Holy Communion. And there around the bedside, Todd was brought into the membership of the parish served by the pastor who was visiting him.

A resurrection occurred in Todd's dying days. It was new life for Todd and new life for those who knew and loved him. There was healing that day and more than a few demons were released.

Yes. Signs and wonders revealing the in-breaking of God's Kingdom and God's work of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Will we know a perfectly restored, resurrected, and healed world this side of the second coming? I don't think so. But even as we wait for the Kingdom to come in its fullness, God has given us signs and wonders to show us that the Kingdom has broken in.

And so, here we are again beholding the signs and wonders. God gives us comfort in our suffering, courage when we are afraid, patience when we are overwhelmed, and the gift of community when we are alone. And more, the vision to notice God's work among us and in the world around us and the Spirit to stir us to actively be part of God's holy work.

Amen.