



February 4, 2024

Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever...Jesus approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them. Mark 1:27



Dear Friends;

I knew a priest who did not like to go to the hospital. It was almost a phobia. Some people are very uncomfortable around the sick and hospitals. Often it is a primal reaction: when someone has an illness, we fear that we might catch it. Or we do not know how we should act. So, we can pretend nothing is happening. Or we can avoid the sick with the excuse "They need to rest." Or we can make the situation about ourselves, hovering over the sick with our "concern," rather than tending to the patient's need for rest, for example.

I am glad that I had the experience of a father who was a doctor and a mother who was a nurse. On occasion growing up, I had the opportunity to follow my dad on house calls or hospital rounds. The one thing that stood out to me was my dad never greeted patients with, "How are you doing?" Instead, he would greet them with "You're looking good!" His brief greeting and attentive presence made a difference for his patients.

It used to be a kind of joke between my dad and his father-in-law (my grandfather) who would greet each other on the phone with "You're looking good." I realized that there was healing power in that little phrase. It made you feel better to be told that you look good. It made you feel like you count, you have a place here, and everything will be fine.

Medical anthropologists distinguish between disease as a biomedical malfunction of an organism, and illness which is a condition in which social connections are cut off and one loses sight of life's meaning. Curing is aimed at disease and is a rare occurrence. Healing is available to everyone all the time. Healing works out a new meaning in life no matter what predicament you may be faced with.

It is impossible to know what diseases afflicted the people who came to Jesus for help. But we do see the social consequences of those afflictions. Jesus the healer remedied those consequences. He assured those he treated that they still belong, and their life has meaning.

Jesus' presence in the house of Simon Peter reveals "Jesus the Healer." Details about Peter's mother-in-law tell us about her predicament. That she is living with her son-in-law is unusual. If she was widowed the culture directs that she should live with one of her sons, not her daughter. Not having a husband or son, she should return to her family of origin. That she is living with her son-in-law tells us she had no other family. This is a precarious situation for this poor woman. And in Middle Eastern culture this fate is worse than any sickness.

What Jesus does by taking her by the hand is to validate her importance. She has a place in the family of Jesus. Jesus has been forming a new family not constructed by blood ties or marriage. This new family is formed by people who want to do the will of God and validate others as valuable to God. The mother-in-law is strong enough to resume her status, role, and normal function. Jesus restored meaning to her life. She responds in typical Middle Eastern fashion by waiting upon Jesus.

We can all be healers like Jesus by validating each person's value.

Peace,

Fr Ron

Esta carta está en español en el sitio web: www.anne.church