

Continuing our three part series of healing stories, today we listen to Mark's Gospel which moves from the Temple to the House. We enter the story where Jesus comes upon Simon Peter's mother-in law, who is sick with a fever. Now, we need to get past the idea about the woman getting up out of her sick bed merely so that she can serve the men. This is a distraction. Yes, she does get up and begin to serve the company of men. But the Greek word here serves us well. This is not one of those places in the Bible where women are shown to be lesser than men. Here the word for serve is *Diakonos*. We can rightfully say that this woman is the first Deacon of the Church.

I love the sentence "and he came, and took her by the hand and lifted her up." This is what Jesus does for all of us who are in any way needing help; he takes us by the hand and lifts us up. And by doing this, we are strengthened, and we are commanded by Jesus to go forward, to TAKE OTHERS BY THE HAND AND LIFT THEM UP. This simple and straightforward. We are asked to take others by the hand and lift them up.

How do we do this? Well, there are a variety of ways. Jesus gathered crowds when people heard that he had been doing healing. Have you shared with your friends ways in which the church helps you get through your own life? Have

you been praying for your friends in need of prayer? Do you let them know you pray for them? I have attended workshops, and some of you probably have as well where the topic concerned welcoming people into the church, especially young singles and families. Young adults are usually defined as being people from the age of 18 to about the age of 35. Now, as most of you are aware, churches need to attract younger people in order to maintain the future of the church. As we are painfully aware, attending church is no longer a given. We compete with a secular culture that does not put worship as a priority.

So, first of all, we need to be prepared to understand just how to treat anyone, *anyone* who is new to us, either as a guest or simply people who may walk through our doors at any time. What I hear, and believe, to summarize, is that we should be welcoming of course, and also not to overwhelm newcomers. Be sure to speak to them and tell them that you are glad to see them. Make sure they get a welcome bag if they'd like one, and of course, ask them if they would like to sign our guest book and leave a contact number, if they'd like to do that.

And most of all, be sure and let them know that we are here if they need a place to worship. Sounds simple doesn't it? The mistake we and lots of other churches make sometimes is to be anxiously trying too hard to get them to come back, to commit, and to join. Yes, we'd like to grow our church. But God wants

more than filling the pews. God wants people to find places where they can become closer to God, places where they can feel safe enough to explore their own individual spiritual journey. We should be a place where people can come and be welcome whether they attend occasionally, seldom, or every week.

Period. Perhaps they will come back; perhaps they may become part of our community. They need to know they are welcome, without undue pressure. And this is a responsibility that each one of us has.

Another way to welcome people is to invite friends to attend. Have you done that lately? Have you mentioned our weekday worship services anyone? Are you letting people know about the Lenten programs?

Not everyone has dramatic healing stories to tell about their own faith journeys, in fact, few people do. Perhaps most of us can't even remember most of what is preached, or specifically how we have been healed. We just know that we are spiritually fed by being here in this holy place. We just know that when we leave here that we take part of that holiness with us and that we are better able to get through the days and the nights, that over a period of time we have made some special kinds of friends and that we are loved by them, no matter what.

When I lived in Kansas, long before I entered into the discernment program toward ordination, or even before I was closely associated with many members of

that larger congregation, an incidence occurred in the grocery store that illustrates the point of being connected with other people from the church community:

I was standing in line at the checkout, and I recognized a woman from Trinity ahead of me who was short of cash. She turned to me and asked if I could loan her five dollars; that she would pay me back soon. I gave the money, feeling quite certain that she would, and, of course she did. And it made me feel good that she felt comfortable enough to ask. No, we never became closest of friends, but we were, and still are connected as part of Christ's body. I guess this anecdote left me exposed to a few jokes! At the earlier service, 2 people asked me to loan them money☺

You've heard me talk about the notion of "the priesthood of all believers". Simon Peter's mother-in-law was not the only person who followed Jesus. Each and every one of us has been called to be a disciple. Think about the ways in which you are already serving God. Think about how you can find ways to share your own love of God with other people. We pray for God's kingdom to come. We are all called to help to bring in that kingdom right here and now.

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?" says Isaiah. God gives power to those of us who wait for the Lord. The Lord will renew our strength; we will

mount up with wings like eagles, we can, with God, run and not be weary, and can walk and not faint. Lift up your eyes and see. God gives us the strength to do God's will!