

Sermon for St. John's, Mt Pleasant
February 7, 2021
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

- [Isaiah 40:21-31](#)
- [1 Corinthians 9:16-23](#)
- [Mark 1:29-39](#)
- [Psalm 147:1-12, 21c](#)

Good morning!

My name is Katie Forsyth and I serve as Canon for Evangelism and Networking for the Episcopal Dioceses of Eastern Michigan and Western Michigan.

This is a long and complicated title, but in short, it means I spend my days connecting the diocese, through our central offices and its congregations via our communications channels, and I also work to equip you and all of our leaders to go out into this world and tell the story of the ministry you are doing and why you do it.

It's great to be with St. John's, Mount Pleasant today, with the few folks in this room and with all of you praying online.

Our Gospel text today continues to tell the story of the beginnings of Jesus' public ministry - some of the first instances of healing, of miracles, of the excitement of crowds, of praying alone. A day in the life.

We are in Capernaum and Jesus and his disciples are headed to Simon's house where his mother-in-law is sick in bed with a fever. Jesus goes to the woman, grasps her hand and helps her up, healing her from her illness. She begins to serve them.

Hearing of this, the people of the town come to Jesus hoping to be healed from their ills and demons. They find that no healing is too large or too small for his attention. They didn't know what we know now - that Jesus is who he is and he has time and compassion for the marginal and the suffering.

The story continues in the early morning, with Jesus going off by himself to pray. His time of prayer connects him with God and grounds him in his calling.

When the disciples find him, they're exasperated, as they often are. They say, "everyone is looking for you!" After all, this is a miracle man on the brink of fame in Capernaum!

Jesus instead tells them it's time to move to the next place. He tells them that the real reason that he is here, here amongst the human family, is to preach and teach and share the Good News.

Meeting people where they are to respond to human need. Retreating for prayer and reflection to ground himself in his calling. Going to preach the Good News.

We are shown how Jesus moves back and forth between doing and being. He heals Simon's mother in law and the others and then he goes off alone to pray and be with God.

The same is true for us. We are called to find some balance in the doing and being. In both service and prayer.

We, as a church, are really great at getting busy with ministries and programs and committee meetings and outreach initiatives and advocating for the human family and... this is all good and necessary and right. And we also are called to take intentional time for God. Time in prayer and worship. Time, both collectively and alone.

After healing the mother in law and the people of the town, Jesus gets up early and goes out alone to pray. Like the temptations in the wilderness, he is being offered fame and laudation if he stays in Capernum and continues his ministry of healing. But he knows he needs to sit and be still and be present with God. This rest and prayer and checking in roots him in his call - to spread the Gospel.

We also see this in the mother in law, right? She is healed. And what does she do? She serves the community. She does not serve because she has to, though it certainly was the custom for women at the time. She serves because this is what discipleship looks like. Jesus' liberation from suffering and a commitment to do the same. There are parts of the church that consider her the first deacon.

The message is this, friends: Jesus doesn't heal just to heal. He doesn't heal because it gets attention or fame. Jesus heals for the sake of the Kingdom. To liberate us from our demons, our ills, our suffering, that we might be PART of something. To liberate us from our earthly constraints to have a role in the Kingdom.

This role is one that is revealed in the mother in law and is revealed in Jesus - "for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.."

Jesus' calling is to teach, to spread the Good News. And not as one who has studied it, not as an academic, but as one who LIVES it. Jesus himself is love, Jesus himself is Good News. He teaches as one who cares deeply for all who hears it. A love meant to be shared. An authority based in compassion, not power. In grace, not judgement. In love, not strength.

And so as disciples, who are serving and being - we seek ways to experience God's love and to invite others to experience it too. This, Paul affirms in our New Testament reading today.

Balance in doing and being. Like the breath, you cannot only breathe in, nor can you only breathe out.

And in this world, this country we live in, we know we tend to be valued by the number of things we create, the number of hours we can bill, the limitless availability of our attention. We are

rewarded for our busyness. And its easy to forget to take time alone to root ourselves in our calling with God.

And we feel the effects of this right? Maybe we're feeling it especially now in the midst of a pandemic. I don't know if you're working from home right now like I am, but I've found I'm working MORE than I might have been otherwise, because the distance from my couch to my desk is so short. Because I'm constantly with a screen and constantly with notifications.

Back when I was able to be physically out in the diocese, pre-pandemic, I spent hours and hours a week in my car. When folks asked if I'd been busy, I had a habit of telling them how many miles I've driven lately, as if my value is tied to the number of places I can hit in a week. Now-a-days, I suspect that number is closer to the number of daily average hours in my weekly screentime reports that my phone sends me every Sunday.

Busyness is such a worldly virtue, that many of us feel compelled to let people know we're always running at full speed. The same can be said for the Church and her ministries. The danger, Mark is telling us, is in letting this doing, this relentless drive, this seeking validation in production, distract us from the gift that is God, right in front of us, asking to be heard, demanding to be felt.

Both doing and being. Both are needed to live into the discipleship Jesus calls us to. We are liberated from our demons, and sent out to serve. We go alone to pray and ground ourselves, then we go out to proclaim the Good News.

One of the very first "sermons" I ever gave was in high school as part of a happening weekend. This is the high school equivalent of Cursillo. My topic was prayer.

And I remember still describing all of the ways in which we pray and the ways in which the Episcopal Church prays. And I described my own experience of still, quiet prayer sitting on the shores of Lake Esau in Presque Isle Michigan while I worked on the staff of Camp Chickagami in the diocese of eastern Michigan.

In the midst of what had been a difficult week - I had a camper that needed so much extra care and support and awareness - sixteen or seventeen year old me, one night after the week was finished, just sat with a friend on an old dock in silence, looking at the stars, listening to the waves and the cicadas. And we were still. And it was important and holy.

And I remember describing this and giving this talk at Happening, only to have an adult mentor come up to me and tell me I didn't talk about the book of common prayer enough. That this description of stillness didn't count.

But it is clear, and Jesus tells us again and again, we are called to sit in the stillness and quiet to ground ourselves and our lives with god.

Be still and know that I am God. Love your neighbor as yourself. Faith and works.

Like Simon's mother in law, we have received the healing power of Jesus. And we know that, more often than not, the healing of Jesus isn't necessarily found in supernatural miracles. It's in

the water of our baptism. The gift of learning from a teacher. A hot meal and kind conversation. The gift of existing in and amongst a congregation like this one. Jesus heals us in the sacrament of the table, giving himself for us and to us.

This story today and all of the other stories of Jesus' miraculous healing is only a prelude to the great healing of Jesus - that healing that takes place on the cross and in the resurrection. That healing that encompasses us all. And calls us all to do and be.

By his death on the cross, Jesus heals us, a people of a broken world, and calls us to service.

Do and be.

Heal and serve.

Pray and go.

Amen.