

Epiphany 4B
The Rev. Emily Richards
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Wholeness in Community

With his characteristic breathless pace, Mark wastes no time in our Gospel passage this morning. In two short verses we learn that Jesus goes to Peter's house, finds that his mother-in-law is sick, and heals her instantly. She then gets up and returns to serving Jesus and his disciples. We have a tendency to focus on the miraculous, physical cure at the end of Jesus' healing stories - when the blind finally receive sight, the deaf hear and the lame walk again. I find this singular interpretation of these complex tales problematic. Living my entire life with a disability I know what it's like to navigate physical and attitudinal barriers on a daily basis. Illness and disability can completely define your identity in the world. I am seen as the priest in the wheelchair or the woman who walks with a slow, halting gait. I know from personal experience that the sense of isolation, loneliness and disconnection caused by illness can be even more painful than the physical suffering, itself.

Dr. Nancy Eiesland was a theology professor at Candler Divinity School in Atlanta and lived with a disability throughout her life. In her seminal work, *The Disabled God* she spoke about her own feelings of isolation within the church as she was unable to participate fully in the sacrament with the gathered assembly. "I have been part of congregations whose practice of receiving communion includes filing to the front of the sanctuary and kneeling at the communion rail," she writes. Often, because I am either in a wheelchair or using crutches, an usher alerts me that I need not go forward. Instead, I am offered the sacrament at my seat after everyone else has been served. The congregation is undoubtedly trying to be conscientious and inclusive in their own way. But in effect, they are transforming the Eucharist from a corporate experience to a solitary one for me, from a sacralization of Christ's broken body to a stigmatization of my disabled body. I am hardly alone. For many people with disabilities, the Eucharist-which should be the ultimate sacrament of unity of believers-is a ritual of exclusion. The Eucharist becomes a dreaded and humiliating remembrance that in the church we are trespassers in an able-bodied dominion."

When Jesus frees someone from illness, he restores them to their community and their full participation within it. They are no longer trespassers in a world that does not accept them. They return to their families and neighborhoods whole in body, mind and spirit. The individual moves from who one who is pitied and stigmatized to one

who is empowered. Free to reclaim their identity as one who serves rather than one being served. "I've begun to see that the joy of wholeness is not measured by physical or even psychical perfection, but by connection to human community," writes Mark Davis in his weekly blog on Scripture. "When, in the New Testament, the person with leprosy was declared clean, it was her/his ticket to re-enter community, to be engaged again in work, family, worship, life. When the demonized person was set free, s/he was set free to fully connect again with others. Peter's mother-in-law was raised to do the things that gave her purpose and meaning. The person who carried a sick one to Jesus walked home arm-in-arm with that friend. We could read them as stories of magic; but we could also read them as stories of human community being healed from the brokenness that sickness, disease, and mental illness can bring."

In this time of unprecedented societal suffering and upheaval we have experienced a collective yearning for connection, belonging and purpose. We are like those in the Gospel stories crying out to Jesus to set us free from our isolation and restore us to the fullness of life in community again. No practice has symbolized this yearning more than our fasting from the celebration of Holy Communion throughout this year. In the fall when we were blessed with warm days, I visited members of my parish on their front porches and in their backyards sharing communion with them after months of being separated from one another and this ritual. Without fail as the wafer hit our tongues tears would fall from our eyes. The sacred words and actions of the Eucharist had restored our connection to one another in Christ.

In the midst of our isolation this year, we have received a newfound understanding of what it must be like for our siblings who because of physical and attitudinal barriers cannot gather around the altar with us, the place where we believe that heaven and earth meet. Our growing compassion for those whose experience of the church is one of exclusion urges us to work ever more diligently to create communities reflective of God's desire that all belong in God's household and are invited to serve around God's table.

Once we have all received the COVID vaccine and it is safe to return to our churches my hope and prayer is that we never forget what we learned from our time of being separated from our communities of faith, our families and our neighborhoods. May we never forget the lessons we learned from our social distancing, our solitude and even our loneliness. For we Episcopalians believe that the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. Following Jesus and his way of love, we are called to participate in the healing and restoration of our world. We not only marvel at the miracles of Jesus we hear throughout his healing stories, but we proclaim them

even now in word and sacrament. Let us return recommitting ourselves to the mission of the church, experiencing anew the joy of wholeness that is not measured by physical or psychological perfection, but by connection to human community. By deeper and more intentional connection to the unity of the broken and beloved body of Christ. Amen.