

## Epiphany 5B. February 7, 2021

When I am on my game—and regulars here know that's by no means all the time—I remember to ask you in our conversations what your vocation is. I probably don't mean by this "what is your job?" But instead, what has God put you here for? What work did God make you to do? Who are you are called to be? When I do ask this question, to one of you or to myself, the most common answer is some version of, "I don't know." Few of us have anything like Jesus' clarity on what we are here to do. But even if we're never going to be as certain as Jesus, it is the most important question we can ask ourselves, individually or collectively. For most of us, it will be a question to follow, rather than one to answer. Our answers will be provisional, incomplete, and malleable. But "I don't know" is not the same as "I have no clue." And today's gospel reading can take us some way along the path of following this question, even if it doesn't give us the answer.

There are a lot of miracles in this passage from Mark. After Jesus raises Peter's mother in law up from her would-be death bed, the whole town lines up outside the door. Some are there to be healed, some to be delivered from the forces of evil that control them, and some surely just to see the spectacle. Jesus spends all evening healing and delivering. Miracles are the main action of this passage. But the miracle that stands out to me is Jesus' determination, after a night of prayer, to walk away from his established success and popularity.

Since coming to Capernaum, he has preached in the synagogue, wowing the faithful, performed an exorcism in the synagogue, raised a woman from her sick bed, drawn the whole city to him, and spent all evening healing and delivering those in need. With everyone in town searching for him, most of us might think that this is a good start to build on. They love him here in Capernaum and, crucially, there is more good work to do. The whole town came to the door, and Jesus healed many. We might assume that there is more healing needed. But even though things are going extremely well, the people desperately want him to stay, and there is more good work to do, after a night of prayer Jesus is perfectly clear that his call is to go on to the next town to proclaim the good news. He views neither success nor, necessarily, need as finally determinative of his vocation.

That kind of clarity might be beyond many of us. It is hard to walk away from something that is working, from a place where we are loved, from a situation where there are needs that we can meet. To do that, we need, indeed, to have tremendous certainty that we are called to do something else. So what do the rest of us, who are not Jesus, do to follow the question of our vocation? Us normal people, who are surely touched by grace, maybe even inundated by it, but we are blessed and saved most of the time without any idea of what's going on.

I think Simon Peter's mother in law might provide us a more accessible baseline for following this question of who we are called to be, what we are called to do, what God has put us here for. Notice that she begins the story laid out, prone, sick well-nigh unto death. This is a great comfort to me, because I spent most of my spiritual life laid out, prone, helpless, and sick well-nigh unto death. But my consistently recumbent spiritual posture is no barrier to God. Jesus

restores her to life, pulls her up into new life. And she knows instinctively that having been given new life, she is called to serve.

There are a few things here. First, she is given new life so that she might serve. There's some weirdness here that we have to name: a reckless reading might think that Jesus healed this woman so that she could serve him dinner. In fact, the Greek word here translated to say that she "served them" is the same word that gives us the English word "deacon." Jesus healed her, and she arose and deaconed them, she served them as Jesus came to serve. It is not in any simple way the case that she is healed and then immediately oppressed. Rather, it is at least also the case that she is healed and, in that healing, comes to understand the Christian life better than the men crowding her dining room do. We are given new life in Christ that enables us to serve. And if we aren't entirely sure what that service is meant to look like, we can imitate our sister and teacher by starting with the work that is in the room before us.

An excellent start to following the question of our vocation is simply to start wherever we are, with the need that presents itself. There are hungry people in the room: let's feed them. Jesus does the same later in this passage—sick people come to the door: let's start there by making them well. For us it may be a need for reconciliation, or for justice, or loving connection, or mentorship, or indeed food or healing. What is God calling us to do? We can begin responding to this question by looking at where God has put us. Look around. Where is love, or justice, or forgiveness, or skills that we happen to have needed? What is the need right in front of you that you that will let you serve?

It's a good start. From there, step two may come less naturally to some of us: following Jesus to a quiet place to pray. Even Jesus found it hard to make time to pray. We will see this throughout the gospel over the course of this year: he steals away to pray, and most of the time he gets interrupted. No one ever has the prayer life they wish they had—even Jesus seems to struggle to pray as much as he would like. But that break in the good work to pray is what lets him see that he is called to make a difficult change, and go on to the next towns. I'll say this as a comfort: God wants to be with us and will meet us when we pray, however bumblingly, for however short a time. God delights in us, and if we can find five minutes a day, they may be the most important five minutes of our day.

The question of our lives is what are we here for. Who are we called to be? What great work is fitted for our passions and skills? We may begin spiritually supine. We don't need to improve that situation before we start following our vocation. God will improve it for us. We notice the ways that God is giving us new life, and we respond by doing in gratitude the work that we find before us, serving those in need in front of us. This already is a long way along the path of vocation. And then even though we know we'll be interrupted and that we're not very good at it, we carve out time to pray. And maybe, in time, we find the clarity and courage that let Jesus follow his vocation into the unknown. It's scary work—but it is the work of our lives, and work that God does with us. Amen.