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Being Contagious

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A friend of mine just confessed he learned a hard lesson about being contagious. He is currently recovering from a very bad cold, and the toughest part about the cold for him wasn't the symptoms like coughing or a stuffy nose. The toughest part was learning he most likely infected a friend of his who ended up suffering with the same symptoms. When his friend told him this, my friend apologized and said that sharing his cold was not his intention, but he also realized it wasn't enough to apologize. He understood he needed to have been more careful about not spreading the cold to others by resting or keeping out of public places, instead of trying to maintain his routine. My friend is a busy guy, so I can see how this could happen. And I admire him for using this as an opportunity to think about his life habits, and make the changes he needs to in order to reflect what he does want to share with others: listening presence, positive energy, hope, and encouragement. All the stuff of health and wellness he wants to show and infect others with.

His reflection made me remember a time when I failed in a similar way. Only I didn't share a cold; I failed to share the best of my faith journey and instead ended up shoring up another person's cynicism against the Church. Back before I was ordained, my parish asked me to serve as Director of Christian Education for children and to "fix" a severely declining Sunday school program. This proved a rewarding challenge, but it had a lot of time that was just frustrating and hard. While I had complete support from the priest, members of the vestry were another matter. Several couldn't understand why I insisted on changing the program in order to make it better. They could see it wasn't working, and wanted it to be better than it was, but somehow expected me to make it better without making any changes. While I was in the midst of this challenge, I sometimes talked about it with a friend of mine who had been raised in the Church, but she and her husband had left the church many years ago, didn't bring their child to church, and really had nothing to do with church. So, in my naiveté, I thought she would be an understanding and safe person to express my frustrations to. However, instead of sympathizing with me, she told me she didn't understand me. She said for someone who spent so much time in church, I didn't say much good about it, which reinforced her view of why she left the church, and she didn't understand why I didn't leave too.

Her feedback was incredibly helpful. I realized that I had made assumptions about my friend simply because she had left the church and had bad feelings about it. I had assumed that meant she could handle my frustrations dealing with challenges in church leadership; and that was wrong. Turns out, she was still hungry for words of hope and I had failed to deliver. Instead of spreading the Good News of the Gospel, I was spreading frustration that was being interpreted as cynicism.

It's a lesson I've never forgotten. And while I do not believe we should ever lie, I've learned to take care to explain the frustrations that come with working with any institution, including the church, in balance with the goal we hope to accomplish, and the importance of community, even with people we don't always like or agree with, why I think it's important to hang in there, and what I am going to do about what is frustrating me instead of just complaining about it. My friend taught me that what I say and how I say it can be contagious, can affect or maybe infect, someone else, and it is important to be mindful of that and take care lest I even unintentionally spread something hurtful or unChristlike. Both of my friends remind me how easy it is to spread something to others, be it a cold or virus, or a mood or emotion, like fear or anxiety or hope or joy.

This lesson could be the same one Jesus was attempting to introduce to his disciples in today's Gospel lesson from Mark. The section of Mark's Gospel we just heard starts right after Jesus had cast out an unclean or unholy spirit from a man in the synagogue. After that healing miracle, which would have liberated the man from whatever was keeping him from being connected to his religious community, or life-giving relationships, or whatever damage that unholy spirit had done, Jesus then restored Simon's (a.k.a. Peter) mother-in-law to her household by healing her or liberating her from a fever that had prevented her from living well.

On a side note: a lot has been written about the original language in this part of the story. Scholars point out that when Jesus took the mother-in-law's hand and raised her up, the word for "raised her up" is the same as when Jesus was raised from the dead. And when she served, the word used for serve is the same word used for what the angels did for Jesus when he was in the wilderness and is also used to describe the ministry of the disciples: *diakonos*. So, some scholars, perhaps embarrassed that this story sounds too much like Jesus' disciples were upset that Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever and therefore couldn't fix them something to eat, so Jesus conveniently healed her so she could cook dinner. They point to the words I just mentioned to suggest

perhaps Simon's mother-in-law was actually a leader in the early church, and a support to Jesus' ministry. Those scholars certainly could and probably do have a point. There were women who followed Jesus too, and it is important to remember their contributions, which too often do get overlooked.

I don't want to skip over that point today, but what I also see in today's Gospel lesson is how after healing two people, word about Jesus certainly spread, and by sundown, after the sabbath was over, people from all over town had brought Jesus those in need of healing. Jesus had certainly caused a stir, had certainly affected people, and perhaps when he went away to pray and reflect, it occurred to Jesus, as it occurred to my friend who is recovering from a cold and to me, the message about him that was getting around town wasn't the one he intended or wanted to spread.

When Simon and the other disciples hunted him down, they reported "everyone" was looking for Jesus, which was a wild and dramatic exaggeration; maybe one intending to evoke a certain response. Perhaps Simon and the others were thinking this was the start of a very successful ministry of miraculous healing, and Simon's own home could become the epicenter for these miracles. After all, "everyone" was showing up there asking for a miracle for themselves, which showed a huge demand. Such a ministry could prove quite lucrative too.

As painful as it might sound, even to our modern ears and hearts, Jesus didn't come and walk among us just to cure colds, chase out demons, and lift fevers. He did some of that, in order to show that he came to restore us to a deeper relationship with God so that we can live the life God has dreamed and continues to dream for us instead of being afraid or held back by the stuff that can get in the way. Not just illnesses, but fear of change or fear of each other or fear of pain, anxiety about not having enough, selfish greed that takes just so someone else can't have, jealousy, and all the other things that can prevent God's kingdom from touching us. Jesus came to show us how life can be godly instead of survival trials, and healing was just a small part of that message.

So, Jesus didn't stay in one place and set up shop, he and his disciples went to other places, met with other people, and no two encounters were exactly alike. There were some similarities, but Jesus had the extraordinary knack of seeing and responding to each situation he encountered with what was needed in that time, in that place, for each person. Because perhaps that was another lesson Jesus came to show us: that God doesn't see us as some lump of humanity, but sees each and every one of us for who we are, and is willing to meet us where we are because he loves us that much. And God's love is what can infect us and help us change, and turn toward God, and stand against those things that try to keep us

from God. His love isn't for one group of people in one place, it is for all people in all places and times. And the only way to spread that message for Jesus was to walk it, step by step, day by day. If you read further into Mark's Gospel you will see it was an incredibly affective way to spread his message, the one he wanted to share, the one he wanted to impact or infect, the lives of people he encountered then, and now.

Perhaps today's Gospel lesson is a good opportunity for each of us to reflect on how we affect the lives of others; to think about how we intend or want to affect others and how our words and actions support that intention or undermine it. As we approach our Annual Meeting in a few weeks, when we will come together as a parish community to look at the year past and look to the year ahead of us, such reflection could also apply to our ministries, and how those ministries reflect our mission to embody Christ to our neighbors. Even our Budget could be an opportunity to both be grateful for the financial contributions that help keep the doors open and think about how that money reflects who we say we are, and are we "putting our money where our collective mouth is"? Today Jesus shows us such reflection can be life-giving and bring us closer to God. Even when we discover we have fallen short, or failed, we can always turn back to God, for that is the power of love, it let's us grow deeper in love with God and our neighbors; and as that love infects us, we can share that contagious love with the world.