

Sermon

Epiphany 5 Year B February 4, 2018

Saint Mark's Episcopal Church, Charleston, SC

The Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I want to speak to you today about our spiritual life...our spiritual lives, especially as it relates to our ability to be compassionate Christians and Episcopalians. I begin by using an image that Sister Ellen Stephen shared at a Conference on Spirituality that I attended.

Sister Ellen Stephen commented on the difference between the ways most men and women visualize or imagine the Christian spiritual life. Men see the spiritual life as linear movement, as a journey from point A to point B if you will. Women, Sister Ellen Stephen said, see the Christian spiritual life more as a dialogue with God, as revelations of Christ, even as an interior castle where one goes from room to room searching. She concluded however

that both Christian men and women are vessels that have capacity—the capacity to be Christ-like.

The healing stories of Mark come before us in these last weeks of Epiphany, perhaps not by chance, but rather as our opportunity to examine our relatedness to being healers, bearers of compassion. From today's Gospel from Mark: *When Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all that were sick...*

Jesus taught by his words, and more importantly by his actions: *Be compassionate as God is compassionate.* This is a constant theme that Christ brings to the forefront of his teachings. And we can once again see that the radical nature of Jesus' teachings was often done in the presence of the disciples, the followers of his Way, so they too could imitate God's nature—to be an imitation of God. So, Christ was teaching by word and example that to live in

the kingdom of God was to be a person who imitated the compassion of God.

The word “compassion” was a word that was incredibly rich in Jewish culture. In both Hebrew and in Aramaic the word usually translated as “compassion” is the plural of the noun that in its singular form means “womb.” Compassion in the Bible is often linked to the womb with such phrases as: a woman feels compassion for a child of her own womb; a man feels compassion for a brother who came from the same womb. So as a feeling, compassion is located in a certain part of the body...in the gut...deep within our very being.

“Passion” comes from the Latin word that means to feel and the prefix “Com” means with—so **com/passion is to feel with.** With both his acts and instruction, Jesus was reiterating the strong teaching of the Hebrew Bible that God is so compassionate that God is if you will, *womb-like*. God nurtures, gives life, cares...God is the Compassionate One. What is radically new for all of his followers to grasp, including each of us, is that Jesus challenges us to **imitate God’s compassion.**

Jesus Christ challenges us to reflect upon the place of compassion in our lives? Are we a compassionate church? Are you a compassionate person? Are you one who feels suffering with another...perhaps with another with whom you have no relatedness? The compassion of the God of Holy Scripture is indiscriminate, what about ours?

Today, our nation and world find many places that call for compassionate attention. Certainly, we cannot respond to every one, or every situation, however we can respond with compassion to some. Mother Teresa once said, “If you can’t feed a hundred persons, then feed just one.” Jesus was calling those who would come to call themselves Christians to live a life with intentional and focused compassion. The word compassion sometimes being mixed in with the word love—as the song lyrics go: “And they will know we are Christians by our love—so too, they will know we are Christians by our compassion.

How do we want to be known at St. Mark’s? We are now at a place, a new chapter in the life and history of St. Mark’s where we

must become both intentional and focused upon our compassion, our love, our outreach in the Name of Christ Jesus. I believe that this compassion needs to be twofold: toward those within our parish and those who join us, and to the diocese and wider community. I along with all of you need to be discerning where God may be calling us anew, as well as what work we presently do that God is calling us to strengthen. Just last week a group from our church prepared and served meals to the families to the families staying at the Ronald McDonald House while their children are receiving critical medical care here in Charleston. Today, we have the opportunity to make a financial donation to the Souper Bowl of Caring, where then your Vestry will decide what worthy ministry and cause should receive that financial assistance.

So, as we now seek to live out the compassion of this Body of Christ at St. Mark's, let us draw strength and purpose from today's words of Isaiah: *Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up*

with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah40) +AMEN.