

**The Very Reverend Shearon Sykes Williams
Saint George's Episcopal Church, Arlington, Virginia
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 8th, 2015
Mark 1: 29-39**

In today's Gospel Jesus heals a woman with a fever and the news spreads quickly. By that evening, the whole town had shown up to see what all the buzz was about. Some people flocked to Simon's mother-in-law's house out of curiosity, some came hoping they would be cured of some illness of their own, and others brought their sick friends or family members. And all of them had an experience that was far beyond anything they could have ever imagined. If you asked them when they left what had happened, they would probably say they felt better than they had before they went or that their heart was overflowing with joy because their child that they had been worried sick about was finally healed. But whatever words they used to describe what it was like to be in that packed out house, it wouldn't really capture the mysterious and profoundly life-changing experience of being in this group of people gathered around Jesus.

This story in Mark's Gospel is the first story of "church". Many scholars think it reflects the experience of the very earliest Christians who met in houses. People came together for worship in a very intimate setting. Those first Christians gathered in homes to experience Jesus' ministry of preaching by listening to a sermon. They came together to experience Jesus' powerful presence through the bread and wine of communion. They gathered to lay hands on one another and pray in Jesus' name about their own needs and those they loved. They came together with longings named and unnamed and left with the peace that passes all understanding. Healing happens in many ways, but it happens in a particularly wonderful way at church when we gather in Jesus' name to live out this story in our own day and time.

Like the people in today's Gospel, some of us are here today out of curiosity and we know this is a place to ask questions. Some of us are here today because that is our spiritual practice, and we know this is a community of spiritual practitioners. Some of us are here because we are searching for peace and we know

this is a place of peace. Some of us are here because we are worried about someone we love and we want to pray for them, knowing that this is a place of prayer. And all of us are here because we need healing, you, me, every one of us, whether we are consciously aware of our need or not. And this is a place of healing, a very particular and mysterious kind of healing that happens when we just show up. Every Sunday, healing happens. Through the celebration, through the conversations with each other. Through the mysterious work of people gathered around worship that embodies Jesus in the here and now and yet connects us with the past.

When we come for the laying on of hands we are linked very explicitly with Jesus' healing ministry. Down through the ages the Church has been laying hands on people and praying for them in Jesus' name. Just like them we pray for ourselves and those we love. The intercessors prepare for their time of prayer with others by first praying themselves and asking God to make them a conduit of God's healing energy. And they place their hands on the heads of those who come for prayer, not trusting

in their own power, but in the power of God to give that person what they need. They lay their hands on people as a way of making the Incarnation, “God with us” more of a lived experience through touch. Our bodies matter. Jesus had a physical body and that makes our bodies sacred. When an intercessor lays their hands on our head in Jesus’ name, we are aware that Christ is especially powerfully present. Sometimes we receive greater peace. Sometimes we get clarity about a course of action we need to take. Sometimes we get something we didn’t even know we needed. Sometimes we might think nothing has happened, but then we notice over the next few days that something new is opening up within us.

Coming for the laying on of hands after we receive communion requires some courage at first. People who aren’t familiar with the practice will often ask me “what do those people in white robes DO in that little room”? It sounds kind of “out there”. So we have to break through the resistance. Sometimes our needs are so pressing or our worry about someone can make us more open to it.

There is nothing hocus pocus about the laying on of hands, but it is powerful. Through it we experience what Simon's mother-in-law experienced. We are restored to wholeness so that we can serve those we love and the larger world in Jesus' name. The early house churches were missionary centers. People came together with a keen sense of purpose. They gathered for worship and then were sent out to heal others. Working for justice. Working for peace and reconciliation. Church wasn't a place to escape the world but to recharge in order to go back out into the world.

Jesus' ministry is consistently described throughout the Gospels as one of prayer and action, prayer and action. In today's story, he gets up very early in the morning, while it's still dark to spend time alone in prayer. He had expended all kinds of energy in his healing of Simon's mother-in-law and half the town the day before so he knew he needed to be refilled. But it didn't last long because his disciples came looking for him and

they went together to the next town to teach and preach and heal the people there.

Our ministry at Saint George's has a similar quality. We are practically a 24/7 operation of prayer and action, action and prayer, more prayer and more action. When we were at the Annual Council for our diocese two weeks ago, I had a number of people come up to me to say they had been hearing a lot of buzz about Saint George's. Like those early churches, we have a lot of exciting things going on. Coming together, going out, coming together, going out.

And having an active corporate prayer life is vitally important to sustain that activity. Without it we become depleted and forget our purpose. And each of us is called in between our times of communal prayer to pray individually every day. That is what fuels our ministry. Daily individual prayer isn't just for people who are called to a ministry of intercessory prayer. If Jesus had to pray every day to keep his ministry going, think how much more we need it.

Our Spring Life, Community and Faith class starts this afternoon. And one of the things we do in LCF is to commit to praying every day during the 8 weeks of the class. We learn a different way of praying each week and we check in with each other about how it's going. It's a way of holding ourselves accountable and growing in our spiritual practice. It's amazing what happens.

We often think we don't have time to pray or we can't make the head space we need to do it, but it's important to remember as we model our lives on Jesus' ministry that he had people placing demands on him left and right. In today's Gospel, his disciples come looking for him. "Everyone is searching for you" Let's get going. People need you. If Jesus found time to pray, we can too. And it's not a luxury. It's absolutely essential. It helps us put our own oxygen mask on first before helping others.

That's why we're here covering this whole block in the center of Ballston. We are a place of healing, a place of prayer and a place of action, all rolled into one. We are a community committed to making space in our lives to be filled and making space to serve others. Jesus' healing of the packed out crowd created a lot of buzz. Good news spreads quickly. And that is what all the buzz is about at Saint George's. Being an inclusive Christian community center committed to ongoing healing, God healing us and us healing others in Jesus' name.