

February 5, 2012 (rev'd)

**Epiphany 5 (B):** Is 40:21-31; Ps 147:1-12, 21c; I Cor 9:16-23; Mk 1:29-39

Last week, there was a photo in the Reporter of a few of the Coldwater Area Ministerial Association pastors, including myself, sitting in a meeting listening to Pastor Jeff Bream of the Northview Christian Church introduce to us what he enthusiastically called a “Bold Faith Initiative” for the churches of Branch County. Jeff’s photo was full of life as he smilingly introduced the topic to the other pastors. The photographic sampler of the rest of us, however, had us looking about as enthusiastic as a wet dishrag. No matter what our individual traditions, we don’t easily get out of our Sunday habits and listen to what the Spirit might be saying to us from another quarter. But it didn’t take long for most of us to agree that we could make adjustments to our sermon plans and that we and our congregations could see Jeff’s invitation as an opportunity to move out of our habitual comfort zones and be more active and intentional disciples of Christ. Unfortunately, Roland Stoy didn’t take another picture of us smiling that day.

Just two Sundays ago we witnessed the astounding change of direction of four fishermen, who at the invitation of a single man named Jesus, left their work in fishing, said goodbye apparently to their families and friends, and followed Jesus, this charismatic and engaging man of wisdom. Simon and his brother Andrew, and James and his brother John, all seemed to have impulsively abandoned their future lives and bet everything on the words and invitation of Jesus.

But today’s Gospel shows Jesus leaving the synagogue gathering at Capernaum and going into the house where Simon and Andrew lived. They were back home, apparently, and at the house was Simon’s wife’s mother, sick in bed. The enthusiastic fishermen seem to have made their way back home (if they had even left) and, rather than following where Jesus went, welcomed him into their own lives at home.

This is a significant detail in the calling of the disciples, I should say, since we may believe that our faith demands loyalty of a kind that takes us out of the context of our present life and puts us into a theologically concentrated environment of constant preaching and re-framing of other people’s behavior and thinking. Some are in fact called to abandon the mainstream of living and to embrace the religious life. But to follow Jesus may require us to stay right where we are and to welcome Jesus into our lives, at least to start with.

As soon as Jesus had arrived at Simon’s house, the fishermen brothers told Jesus about Simon’s mother-in-law. And Jesus healed her. Jesus stepped into their lives and brought instant wholeness right there to another member of their extended family.

We are accustomed to saying we’re going “to” church. And that’s true in the sense that we are going to a certain building to worship with others. But the church really is the collective of all those who, in faith, have encountered Jesus in their lives. The church is all who celebrate that encounter and share their experience with others wherever they are – at home or on Facebook, at work or school, or with a seatmate on a plane. It’s then that Jesus becomes present where we are. The church is with us. And Jesus, as the head of the church, follows

us around inasmuch as we allow him to shadow us in this way. And then, amazing things begin to happen right at home as well as “at church” when we welcome Jesus as a companion on our journey throughout an otherwise ordinary day.

The current church’s season after the Epiphany is meant to be an intentional time for us to extend our understanding of Jesus’ place in our personal lives to others – and to not be bashful about doing that. I know – we’re Episcopalians. And we generally feel it might be a bit pushy and even inappropriate in certain contexts to thrust our theological perspectives on someone else. Sometimes this is true. But perhaps our vocation as Episcopalians is instead to prayerfully invite Jesus into the lives of others – as the fishermen invited Jesus into the sickroom of Simon’s mother-in-law. Perhaps it’s our vocation to then stand back and, with faith, allow God through the Spirit of Christ to bring about in another a change of circumstances, or to effect a healing, or to soften a heart in forgiveness, or to bring release from agonizing grief or sorrow, or to open new doors with new opportunities so long resisted. Remember that we are seed-planters in others of the new life in Christ. We are not Christ ourselves. But we are conduits of the Spirit of Christ out into the world where we can share with another our wondering fascination with the responses to faith in our lives and encourage others to await God’s response in theirs.

I was re-reading a Christmas letter from some friends the other day and was amazed at the number of “we were blessed by” phrases throughout their news of family activities throughout the past year. How many of us use that phrase so nonchalantly in our everyday conversation? When we arrive at that portion of the Prayers of the People where we may offer prayers of thanksgiving for blessings, is our silence because we haven’t taken time to rehearse minute by minute our daily and hourly blessings? Those thanksgivings should just roll off our tongues or fill our quiet minds very easily. Things we take for granted, like our health, or heat in the house, or a meal on the table, or the sound of a bird enjoying the sun when the winter temperatures suddenly sneak above freezing all provide opportunities for thanksgiving.

Those of us who are technologically savvy might want to avail ourselves of the blog site for this month’s Bold Faith Initiative at [www.boldfaithinitiative.wordpress.com](http://www.boldfaithinitiative.wordpress.com) and share our experiences of God working in our lives as we more intentionally join our faith with prayer, and prayer with a disciple’s obedience, and obedience with sacrifice of our usual routines for the sake of others this month. But you don’t have to blog the world with your experiences. You may even just share your Christian walk with one other person over coffee or lunch some day. The point is to be intentional about it – disciplined in sharing your faith and observations of the Spirit at work while planting the seed of faith in another from the flower that’s blooming within you.

When the Spirit of Christ finds us, that’s when we find it easier to see the many blessings in our own everyday life and to give thanks to God for them. And, as with Simon’s mother-in-law who began to serve those in the house after her healing, we too will be moved by Christ to serve others in a more intentional way.

Maybe, too, like Simon, Andrew, James, and John, we'll be surprised to see how Christ will use us to bring others into relationship with Jesus Christ, the one who brings healing and wholeness to all of us.

But from today's Gospel, we also note that, in the early morning, Jesus left the crowds and the busy house and went out to a deserted place to pray, to replenish himself, to seek God's direction for the next day. And, in spite of the fact that "everyone was searching for him," he invited his disciples to move on with him to the next towns to reach others with the same healing and life-changing message he'd brought to their own house.

Jesus is at home with us. But he won't stay there. And we can't just stay at home, either. As Christians, we boldly and confidently go with him out into the world of our everyday lives. And it's there that we discover the context of his healing ministry, among those we ourselves know and love – and even among those we find difficult to know or love.

So in this month of a bold faith initiative, who is it in your household or out there in your world this week that awaits the healing presence of Christ through you? There is at least one person. Plant your seed of faith through prayer for her or him, that the Spirit of Christ might move that person's life in a fresh and hopeful direction. In this way, the Spirit of the risen Jesus today goes from house to house, and from town to town, to find us and others, and to bring healing and wholeness to those who may not yet even know that they seek him.

This is our boldness of faith in action. And it happens because we have confidence and faith that God in Christ will respond. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?...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" [Is 40:21, 31]. That is good news – and enough to put a smile of confidence and excitement on the face of the CAMA pastors and a green wristband on my arm as a reminder of my own intention to engage in a Bold Faith Initiative of prayer, obedience and sacrifice this month myself.

Amen.