

**Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain**  
**Saturday 7, Sunday 8 February 2009**

**READING**

Matthew 1: 29-39

I know a man with no hands. They were blown off by a letter bomb when he was working against Apartheid in South Africa. One of the things he regrets most is not being able to touch another human being with his hands. Yet he, Michael Lapsley, works tirelessly for peace and reconciliation in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and indeed around the world. He has a healing touch.

In today's gospel, Jesus is tired after a day's work and retires to his friend Peter's house to rest. Peter's mother-in-law is sick with a high fever. Jesus goes to her, holds her hand and lifts her up – the same word for raised or lifted up is used on Easter morn 'he is not here, he is risen' but it was also used of Jesus being lifted up on the cross. Touched and healed by Jesus she becomes a minister of healing herself. She and Jesus connect. She draws strength.

Jesus doesn't ask her to serve, to go on the pastoral care team or the morning tea or cleaning roster. It is her response to healing. This unnamed woman ministers in a culturally appropriate way, offering hospitality with head, hands and heart.

Jesus rests with friends. Then that evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick and possessed with demons (1:32) and the whole city was gathered around the door ... How did he feel? How did he do it? All this healing?

Early in the morning before it is light he goes to a deserted place to pray, to touch base with the source of his strength. I imagine he listens, opens himself, allows the power of the divine to flow through him. I imagine he reflects on his day – giving thanks, sharing, letting go of all the crap that has stuck to him. Perhaps he remembered the words of Isaiah as he rested, and drew strength:

*But those who wait for the Lord  
Shall renew their strength,  
They shall mount up like eagles,  
They shall run and not be weary,  
They shall walk and not faint. (Is.40:21-31)*

I wonder, how do you renew your strength? When in your day do you make time to rest in God?

I know a man who arrives 15 minutes early for work, sits in his car in the carpark and there he prays. I know another man whose jogging is his time to

pray. I know a young woman who prays during the night as she feeds her baby. I know a man who meets with colleagues at work regularly to share and to pray. I know a woman who prays with her gardening and another man who used to climb out onto the roof at night and look at the stars.

I sit on my bed in the quiet of the morning, and rest in God. I meditate with others on Tuesday lunchtime. I walk regularly. I receive nourishment in the Eucharist.

How about you? How do you connect with the source of your strength? And what hands heal you and lift you up?

I wonder where you connect to God in this service? Is it the people around you that lift you up? The music? The hymns? The sermon? Prayers? Eucharist?

Simon and his companions hunted for Jesus. When they found him they said to him (in an accusing tone I imagine) “Everyone is searching for you? (v. 37)

Jesus centred, strengthened and relaxed, answered:

*Let's get on with it.*

*Let's go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that's what I came but to do. (v. 38)*

Jesus set the agenda from his own clarity, from his centre, from his connection to the Divine. He was clear and wouldn't be pushed around.

I wonder though, do we allow or encourage each other to take time to rest from ministry responsibilities when we are without strength, or do we, like the disciples, barge in on others' space?

Prayer seems vital in keeping our focus for ministry, as does encouraging each other in our prayer life – in whatever it is that keeps each of us strongly connected / attached, strongly centred in God.

I propose to you that each of you find yourself a prayer partner, a supporting hand, to be with you on your journey through lent.

You don't have to meet in person. You could touch base on the phone, or SMS or email, or after church. I encourage you to find someone to pray for you – share a little of what is on your heart and ask them to pray, and in turn, listen to them, and pray for them.

I imagine you would connect with each other weekly, maybe more, maybe less, during lent. Then review, and decide whether to continue. The initial commitment is for lent which begins 24<sup>th</sup> February until Easter, 12<sup>th</sup> April. I challenge you, how about it?

Henri Nouwen writes:

*We serve the world by being spiritually well... The first question is not, "How much do we do?" or "How many people do we help out?" but "Are we interiorly at peace?"* (p.36, *Jesus: A Gospel*)

The distinction between contemplation and action can be misleading. Jesus' actions followed from his interior communion with God. His presence was healing, and it changed the world.

In a sense he didn't do anything! "Everyone who touched him was healed."

Nouwen writes:

*Ministry is when two people toast their glasses of wine and something splashes over. Ministry is the extra. The question is not, "How do I bring all of these people to Jesus, or how do I make these people believe, or how do I now do the hard work of ministry?"*

*Ministry happens...*

*I'm not concerned with fixing the marriage of the one who is considering divorce or convincing the woman who doesn't believe in Jesus. I'm here to say this is who I am, and to be there for others.*

*Jesus spoke what his heart was full of. And anybody who touched him was healed. He didn't sit people down and diagnose them, or say to them, "I can help you but I can't help you." People touched him and were healed. You cannot but minister if you are in communion with God and in communion with other people. People want to know where your energy comes from. They get the overflow. It's not something that requires professional credentials. Ministry isn't something you do for certain hours during the day and then you come home and relax. Who knows? Ministry might happen while you are relaxing. [Look at Jesus at Peter's place.]*

*Two words I think are helpful for ministry are "compassion" and "gratitude". Ministry happens when you participate in the mystery of being with. The whole incarnation, God-with-us, Emmanuel, is first of all being with people. Caring means "to cry out with". Compassion literally means "to be with those who suffer". Ministry means that we lift the incarnation – we lift the God who says, "I will be with you". We are to be precisely where people are vulnerable, not to fix it or to change it. That is an unintended fruit of it, but that is not why you are there. Compassion is the priesthood of Jesus... Jesus is first of all God-with-us. For thirty years he was just living in a small village, living the same life that we live. It was only for three years that he was preaching. So even when you look at it in a spiritual way, Jesus' ministry wasn't just the three years he was preaching. The mystery is that he shared our lives. God is a God-with-us. Ministry is being with the sick, the dying, being*

*with people wherever they are, whatever their problems. We dare to be with them in their weakness and trust that if we are entering into people's vulnerable places, we will experience immense joy. That is the mystery of ministry.*

*You can't solve the world's problems, but you can be with people.*  
(p.36-38, *Reaching Out*)

You can be present, allowing yourself to be healed and lifted up and to share in that process.

Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori Primate Episcopal Church USA says:

*Jesus' healing touch was grounded in open vulnerability. He received the yearning masses, healing as many as he could. He taught the crowds about the present reality of God's reign, breaking in all around them, and he offered hope. He silenced the demons who would cry out that there is no hope. He formed disciples by letting them try the work themselves, even though they frequently failed. He held himself open to whatever and whomever the day presented, even the terror of execution at the hands of any occupying government. His service was one of constant lifting up, in the face of forces that would tear down.*

*Will you let yourself be taken by the hand and lifted up? Where and how will you join hands, reach out, and lift up others to healing? For, indeed, as Simon and his companions said to Jesus when they found him at prayer, "everyone is searching for" that physician of hope.*

*Precious Lord, take my hand*

*Lead me on, let me stand*

*I am tired, I am weak, I am worn*

*Through the storm, through the night*

*Lead me on to the light*

*Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.*

*– Thomas A Dorsey, 1932*

*Let us pray.*

*O God, your loving hand has made us in your own image, given us all we possess, and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: reach out your hand and heal us, that we may respond in kind, offering your hope and healing to all who ware broken in body or spirit, that together we may be your whole and healed and holy Body on this earth. This we pray in the name of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*