

How do we renew our strength? Well, as many of you know, I'm having a lot of need for new strength this winter... bad cold at Christmastime, then another one at the end of January! Like the songs says, sometimes I feel discouraged. Other times I just feel tired... and then comes the work of preparing worship and sermons, (which can be discouraging, in thinking that I can't preach like Peter or pray like Paul!) But, as the song says, I can always tell the love of Jesus, who gave his life for all!

This morning's gospel lesson is a story about Jesus' love, as shown in his healing encounters. Simon, who was later called Peter or the Rock, was one of the first disciples, and we learn that Simon Peter was married, and that his mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Well, the gospel writer says her strength was renewed with the simple touch of Jesus' hand! Jesus simply "took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her!"

We wish it were that simple! I tried lots of prayer this past week; my fever took still lasted too long, coughing made my head hurt, night times were punctuated with 2AM and 4AM steamy showers, mornings and afternoons called for naps, and soon my kitchen table began to look like a pharmacy isle of drugs recommended for cold or flu! Seems like there are hundreds of suggested remedies and supplements, so we try this and try that, but in the last analysis, it seems most colds still "run their course" of at least 7-10 days! This is day 8, so I should feel pretty good again by Tuesday?!

But, yes, I still keep praying for a shortening of sick days. The Bible is consistent in its promise that prayer helps us to renew our strength. The gospel story says that the "whole city" was crowded around the door of Simon's house looking for Jesus and his healing touch, so that early in the morning darkness he somehow "escaped" to a lonely place for a time of prayer. Yes, *even Jesus had to renew his strength* in some quiet place! Jesus did so many healings, and they were usually one at a time, often with physical touch. So Jesus got tired at times, and needed to rest and

pray. Jesus was a practicing Jew, so he knew and felt the need for regular Sabbath, for rest from his work.

The Prophet Isaiah, in the famous 40th chapter, also emphasizes the importance of pausing for prayer (or “waiting for the Lord”) to renew our strength. He says if we wait for the Lord we will “fly with wings *like eagles*”... and we will “run and not be weary.” His assurance can seem “pie in the sky.” We know that “flying like an eagle” is a vision, a poetic image! And I am not going to take “run and not be weary” literally either. (I gave up on running for any considerable distance a long time ago!) However, that last phrase I can take fairly literally: “You will walk and not faint!” The older I get, the more it makes sense to me. I see Willem Lang, on public television, Windows to the Wild. He is often trekking up mountains with his walking sticks, white-haired, yet keeping up with his younger fellow hikers. I see our friend Norm, trucking along, ready to greet anyone with a smile and goodwill. Several of our elders for that matter, now using canes... (I hope I do as well when I’m your age); Isaiah’s prophecy or vision is for you: If you continue to wait for the Lord, you will walk and not faint! There’s something about purpose in life that can keep us steadily going! And for followers of Christ, we always have purpose. We always can do our best to stand and walk, and to walk with purpose!

I want to mention the gift of community that is part of healing. While Jesus was also known to heal from a distance, usually his healings were face to face, close up, and often with touch. Holding a hand of a loved one who is sick is so important. Jesus shows us this example with Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. He *went to the home* of Simon Peter (and Simon’s wife and Simon’s mother-in-law.) It was an intimate setting, there was healing with genuine caring and love.

Hear these beautiful words from a medical doctor and psychotherapist by the name of Gerald May: *“God's grace through community involves something far greater than other people’s support and perspective. The power of grace is nowhere as brilliant, nor as mystical as in communities of faith. Its power includes not just love that comes from*

*people and through people, but love that pours forth **among** people, as if **through the very spaces** between one person and the next. Just to be in such an atmosphere is to be bathed in healing power.*

I must say that being around “loving others” sure does help healing! Did I say “loving *others*?” I learned first hand that *my dog* Luke has some sort of special sensitivity that is beyond most of us humans. He did not jump all over me and pester me to play ball in the back yard or insist on his timing about things; when I told him I was tired and just needed to rest on the couch, he would just curl up next to me, pressing his warm body against mine, and wait until I was ready to get up!

Speaking of the animal world, most of us have heard about the psychologist who studied the power of touch using monkeys, and determined that infant monkeys deprived of touch failed to thrive. Similar results have been observed in human children who did not get much touch or love as infants. Yes, loving touch is not only healing, but necessary to growth and development.

We, as a church, can feel sick and discouraged. We, are not exactly flying like eagles or running without getting weary; we may be lucky to be walking without fainting. We need the continual touch of Jesus, the healing of friendships. As a church, we can find the healing and comfort of a community of love. Jesus said his followers will be known by love. Then we can be his hands and his feet to bring this to all the world around us.

The celebration of communion reminds us of the broken body of our Lord. It reminds us that Jesus joined this world in all it's flaws and sufferings. Whatever we are going through, from inconvenient winter colds, to chronic illness, or painful betrayal, we know that Jesus and many others have gone through something similar. We join with the rest of humanity in the suffering itself, and we do our best to join those with overcoming spirit. We are one, we are united, in both the suffering and the healing. Amen.