

“Shushing in Order to Serve”

B Epiphany Five

Mark 1:29-39; Feb. 4, 2018; 10:00 am

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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I. A HAND UP

²⁹⁻³¹ Directly on leaving the meeting place, they came to Simon and Andrew’s house, accompanied by James and John. Simon’s mother-in-law was sickn bed, burning up with fever. They told Jesus. He went to her, took her hand, and raised her up. No sooner had the fever left than she was up fixing dinner for them. (Mark 1:29-39)

"Jesus came and took her (Peter's mother-in-law) by the hand and lifted her up."

Have you ever had a hand up? Not a “hand *out*, though there are times for that as well. Have you ever been lifted up, given a hand, healed and raised up, so you could go back in the circle and join into life again?

Jesus is back at it! Directly and immediately, without hesitation. Without wasting a minute—he has (all in the first chapter of Mark!) received his calling and had it affirmed by the Holy Spirit Dove in Baptism; gone into the Wilderness to test out the Plan; taught in the synagogue and raised a stir because of his spirit of authority; challenged the troubled spirits and sent them packing and now is off to lunch at Peter’s house. But.

But, before they can wash up and pull up a chair, there’s tending to the needs of one of the lowliest yet most important people in the house to be done.

Peter’s “mother-in-law”. She doesn't even get a name in the scriptures, yet she is an icon—for she has become known down through ages as the one Jesus healed in a moment and raised up out of her sickbed and restored to life.

Not just so she could “get back to waiting hand and foot on the men” as some are wont to describe this moment, but so that she is restored to life—living, loving and serving. Buzzing in the center of the community that is her life. Where she belongs and finds meaning.

II. GIVING A HAND

Have you ever been offered a hand and lifted up, so that you could get “back to your life?” Get back at it, on with the program, doing what you feel called to do?

Have you ever held out your hand to another and given them an assist? A boost? Been the agent of healing and help that was exactly what and who they needed in that moment?

I’ve been watching around here, this week in particular, for hands reaching out and offering a lift up, a help, even an extra set of nimble fingers.

Last Sunday, in the middle of the choir anthem, Teresa’s music developed a mind of its own—and though I’m not sure what it was doing, I *am* sure it wasn’t sitting nicely on the piano in the place it was supposed to be! Jeff Keidel immediately hopped up, vaulted three pews (well, *almost* vaulted!), reached out his hands and straightened out that music. Teresa and the Choir didn’t miss a beat!

On Thursday, St. Brigid’s Day, I also saw many helping hands—this one I’m not even sure I can describe! We were trying (and I mean *trying*) to make St. Brigid’s crosses, twisting reed grasses around just so, turning at the right minutes, winding in the right place, tightening and clothes-pinning and contorting our faces just right to make it work!

Janet was exuding the patience of Job. This was even harder than teaching people how to sing! And across the table from me, I saw hands. Betsy came around behind Norma and offered her *two more* hands. And it was amazing what a difference that made! Somehow, four hands holding and pinning and twisting and working together made it all possible.

III. WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF GIVING A HAND?

As I went through the week, I saw many instances of people—here and all over the world, actually—giving a hand up, lifting and healing and restoring to life. Some were helping with craft projects and music, and some were literally life-saving and life-changing.

And sometimes, I saw folks hesitating, and *not* reaching out and offering a hand—for whatever reason--and then I saw tears and regret and “if only I had....” and painful hindsight.

And I begin to ponder: what makes us hesitate? Not jump up from that chair and offer a hand? Not turn down that road to go visit that person before they leave this world? Not pick up the phone and make that call?

And the key lies in the end of this story.

³⁵⁻³⁷ *While it was still night, way before dawn, Jesus got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed. Simon and those with him went looking for him. They found him and said, “Everybody’s looking for you.”*

Jesus didn’t just keep healing and teaching and cranking away on everything that needed doing. He didn’t stay in the fray until he was fried.

He retreated to a lonely place. A place of silence. Where the voices stopped. Where the clamoring needs of others took a break—even if for a short while. In our modern language we might call this the “quieting of the monkey mind.”

Jesus shushed it all out.

Shush—isn’t that a great word?

The dictionary defines it in a very complex way: to silence or calm (someone) by or as if by saying “shush”. (!)

IV. SHUSHING THE VOICES

But Jesus didn’t just go off in the quiet to pray *after* the healing; after he had helped people to re-charge. He also, *earlier*, shushed the voices—the ifs and buts and what ifs—that would keep him from taking the step, of reaching out and taking the woman by the hand and lifting her up.

“But, she’s just a woman.”

“But, if you touch her hand, your hand will be unclean.”

“But, everyone is waiting for you in the dining room, what are you doing down the hall? Hurry up!

“But aren’t you tired of everyone clamoring for your help?”

What do *we* need to shush, when we are faced with a moment to decide? Faced with the choice to “get involved” or “keep a step back”? To reach out a hand and lift up another to life? Or, get on with our business, get to lunch, not take a detour down the hall?

What needs to be shushed in us in order to help?

Could it be any of these voices:

“I don’t know what to say!”

“I feel so helpless. I don’t know *what* to do.”

“They don’t want *my* help”

“I shouldn’t bother them today.” “They’re probably busy”

They’ve got family here, I don’t want to intrude.

They have friends who are closer than I.”

“I’m not sure what kind of help they really need, nor if I can give what’s needed, so I’d better not “go there.”

“I don’t know if they truly need help or are just looking for a handout.”

“I’m sure another day would be better.”

“I wouldn’t want to interfere with someone’s parenting; they might take it wrong.”

What “hesitating voices” do we need to shush, in order to be like Jesus and lift up another soul?

V. STORIES OF A HELPING HAND (OR 12)

A woman named Beth Dunnington wrote this story this week that touched the world.

Something extraordinary at LAX today... (writing this on the plane). I was at the gate, waiting to get on my plane to Portland. Flights to two different cities were boarding on either side of the Portland flight. A toddler who looked to be eighteen or so months old was having a total *meltdown*, running between the seats, kicking and screaming, then lying on the ground, refusing to board the plane (which was not going to Portland).

His young mom, who was clearly pregnant and traveling *alone* with her son, became completely *overwhelmed*... she couldn't pick him up because he was so upset, he kept running away from her, then lying down on the ground, kicking and screaming again.

The mother finally sat down on the floor and put her head in her hands, with her kid next to her still having a meltdown, and started crying.

Then, this *gorgeous* thing happened. (I'm crying just writing this)... the women in the terminal, there must have been six or seven of us, *not* women who *knew* each other, approached and surrounded her and the little boy and we knelt down and formed a circle around them.

I sang "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" to the little boy... one woman had an orange that she peeled, one woman had a little toy in her bag that she let the toddler play with, another woman gave the mom a bottle of water.

Someone else helped the mom get the kid's sippy cup out of her bag and give it to him. It was so gorgeous; there was no discussion, and no one knew anyone else, but we were able to calm them *both* down, and she got her child on the plane.

After they went through the door we all went back to our separate seats and didn't talk about it... we were *strangers*, gathering to solve something. It occurred to me that a circle of women (or men), with a mission, can save the world. I will never forget that moment.

A PEACOCK NAMED DEXTER

Another story, also in an airport. Needed a little different approach, but you never know how your outstretched hand might be needed, or what form “support” comes in!

Sometimes, unfortunately, our “support people” aren’t able or allowed to be with us for the whole journey. Such was the case with a woman from New York City.

It seems this artist named Ventiko doesn’t have the typical *support* animal, like a seeing-eye-dog or therapy canine, but something a little different: A Support *Peacock*.

NEWARK, N.J. (AP) — A United Airlines passenger who tried to take her emotional support peacock with her on a cross-country flight has had the bird turned away by the airline because of health and safety concerns.

New York City-based photographer and performance artist Ventiko says she bought a ticket for her peacock, Dexter, so he would have his own seat on Sunday's flight from New Jersey's Newark Liberty International Airport to Los Angeles.

A spokeswoman for Chicago-based United says the peacock didn't meet guidelines for several reasons, including its size and weight. Spokeswoman Andrea Hiller says the issues had

been explained to the passenger three times "before they arrived at the airport."

But, there's a happy ending. When the word got out of Dexter being barred at the gate, he tweeted that his "human friends" will be driving him cross-country. He will meet up with his person and carry on in his service and support role.

VI. WE ARE ALL CONNECTED—CELLULAR LEVEL

A "support peacock" or a bunch of people laughing and tangling up their fingers around a complicated craft project may not seem life-changing, or on the same level as Jesus literally healing Peter's mother-in-law and restoring her to her life and purpose.

But, that again is where we need to shush the naysaying voices, and remember that no act of kindness or offering an assist is unimportant to the person being lifted up.

For, we are all connected in ways we can't even imagine. We literally beat with one heart in this human race. A biological fact:

"If you place two living heart cells from different people in a Petrie dish, they will in time find and maintain a third and common beat." (Molly Vass)

Mark Nepo, author of *The Book of Awakening* comments:

"This force is what makes compassion possible, even probable. For if two cells can find the common pulse beneath everything, how much more can full hearts feel when all *excuses* fall away?"

"This drive toward a common beat is the force beneath curiosity and passion. It is what makes strangers talk to strangers, despite the discomfort. It is how we risk new knowledge. For being still enough, long enough, next to anything living, we find a way to sing the one voiceless song." (p. 40, *The Book of Awakening*)

When the voices—the yes, buts, and other excuses tempt us to convince ourselves that we are separate beings, rugged individuals who need to stay that way, we need to counter those voices with the shared "third beat" and the song of a common heart.

VII. JANE ANNE AND HAL:

Unfortunately, I got a chance to practice what is preached this weekend. To bump right up against that immense feeling of helplessness when you learn of a tragedy and look in the dark for a way forward. To push through the voices that would derail and say "there's nothing you can do."

My dear friends and longtime colleagues, Jane Anne and Hal met tragedy this week. We've known each other many years, and are fellow-parents of: "exceptionally bright, creative and challenging kids we are trying to raise" with exes after a divorce. They lost one of those exceptional kids, their 26-year-old son, to suicide on Thursday.

I stared at my phone in disbelief at first—a picture of the smiling young man with his stepmom posted on her Facebook page. That's not *my* friend's son, is it? How can this be?! Yep. That's his first, middle and last name and that's his mom's name tagged in the heart-wrenching post.

What could I do? How to respond? Would they want to hear from me? I thought about the voices in my head, and even an "official letter" that came out urging everyone to "give them the

gift of privacy to grieve and heal. To share your condolences later.”

And I shushed that voice. And I couldn't be more grateful I did. I decided to take the opposite approach and smother them with love and prayers and words of love and support. And *they* couldn't be more grateful that I did.

For I learned that they *didn't* have a bunch of family around. They *didn't* want to just hear from “closer friends than I.” They weren't overwhelmed with texts and calls. They were just hurting and needing a hand and heart reached out from people who loved them.

So, I texted and I held them in constant, never-ceasing prayer. As I swam, I reached out to God, in the fluffy clouds and beautiful blue sky of Spirit's loving arms. And I told them they were held, and to breathe, and to call any time, day or night, that they were not alone. That “my mother's heart is aching for your mother's heart and holding you so close.”

And I kept telling them. Every day.
And I heard back:

“Rebecca this means so much. I still can't take it in that he is gone.
Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you so much! Thank you for all the love.

“Thanks so much for staying in touch. Did not sleep much Thurs pm.
But did rest last night. Your support means A lot.

Friday night I thought of their friends who might not have heard. Jesus Scholar and Irishman John Dominic Crossan is a longtime friend and fellow pilgrim. I figured he'd probably heard, but I took a chance and wrote to him. As a pastor and friend, I'd rather be told fifteen times that someone is in crisis than take a chance of not knowing and being able to respond.

First thing Saturday morning, I found a note:

Thank you, Rebecca. We did not know. What a tragedy.

And I urged Dom Crossan to shush the voices saying to “give them space” and to reach out—that I knew they would love to hear from him too.

Then, I sent a video link to “Just Be Held.” Because everyone needs to know this. All the time, but in the especially-tough times especially:

Hold it all together
Everybody needs you strong
But life hits you out of nowhere
And barely leaves you holding on

And when you're tired of fighting
Chained by your control
There's freedom in surrender
Lay it down and let it go

So when you're on your knees and answers seem so far away
You're not alone, stop holding on and *just be held*

Just.Be.Held.

VIII. REACH OUT AND TAKE SOMEBODY'S HAND

Have you ever been offered a hand and lifted up, so that you could get “back to your life?” Get back at it, on with the program, doing what you feel called to do?

Have you ever held out *your* hand to another and given them an assist? A boost? Been the agent of healing and help that was exactly what and who they needed in that moment?

Have you ever hesitated—listening to all the voices that would hold you back, cause you to second-guess whether you should get involved or not? Have you ever been eternally grateful for the shushing that someone else did of those voices, so they could reach out and lift you up?

“For Christ has not given us a spirit of timidity but of love and power.” Shush those voices! Tell those naysayers to take a hike. Reach out and touch somebody’s hand. Join the beating of your heart with another to find that common third beat and shared song this day. Amen.