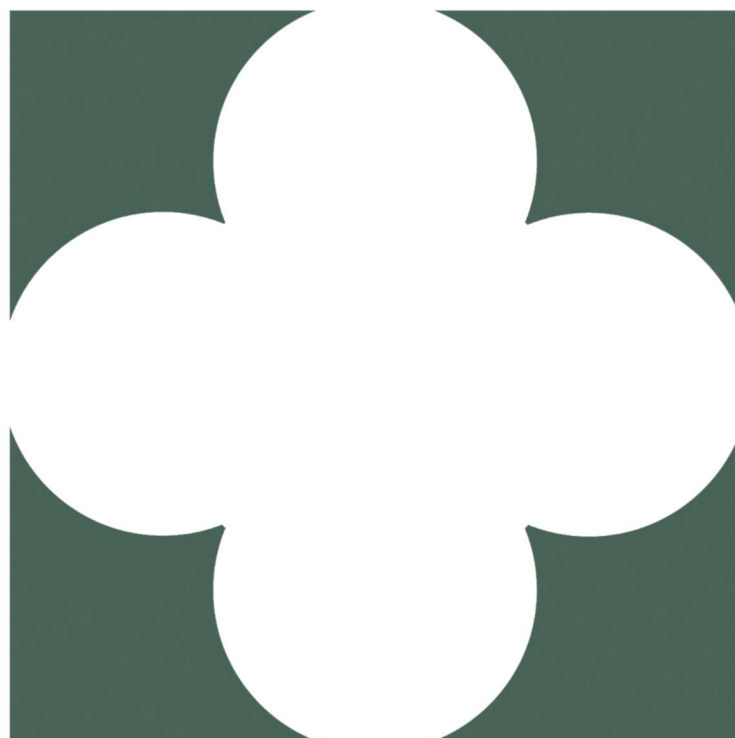


# A Caring Community

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**Annual Meeting Sunday, Epiphany III**

Mark 1:29-31

Over the past two years, we have had to give up a lot. I'm not going to list examples because I'm sure each of us can come up with too many things we've had to delay or miss entirely due to the COVID pandemic. It has been two whole years since the virus was detected here in the Seattle region, the first location in the United States to find it, and in that time we have been through a tremendous trauma—individually and as a community.

And yet—through feelings of fear, anxiety, grief, anger, distrust, worry, exhaustion, and more – and yet, we have continued to show up for each other. Pastor Tim often says, “Never underestimate the power of showing up,” and I'm so glad he has imprinted that on our brains, because I think we have seen that right here at SFBC. We have accomplished so much – shown up for each other so much in the past two years, though in perhaps different ways than we had planned.

Our Scripture today tells a story about not underestimating the power of showing up and supplies a blueprint for community care.

As has been our practice since the beginning of Advent, we turn to Dr. Wilda C. Gafney's *Women's Lectionary* for her translation of Mark 1:29-31:

*Immediately after [Jesus and the disciples] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now the mother of Simon's wife was in bed with a fever, and immediately they told Jesus about her. Jesus came and lifted her up, taking her by the hand. Then the fever left her, and she ministered to them.*

Now first in our blueprint of care, there's hospitality: Jesus and disciples entered the family home of Simon (who later we will hear called Peter) and Andrew. In both the gospels of Mark and Matthew, Simon and Andrew receive Jesus' call to be “fishers of men,” leaving their nets at the shore and leaving their father to make his livelihood alone. However, though we may often think of the disciples responding to Jesus' call and at once leaving behind home and hearth and material possessions...that is not quite the case here, as the house Jesus enters is referred to as “theirs.”

To enter a house requires hospitality. Someone issuing an invitation, someone knocking at the door, someone inviting guests over the threshold. Hospitality is something I have dearly missed during COVID, and I've heard many of you are missing it, too. Being able to share meals with one another, sitting in the living room for tea, singing around the piano, cooking together and watching sports together. Celebrating holidays together and sharing a comforting hug in a difficult time. But I have also been amazed at how creative you have been at finding ways to offer hospitality even during a time when it has not been as safe to gather in homes. You have shared baked goods with our neighbors experiencing homelessness, you have driven each other to doctor appointments and to summer classes, you have offered Halloween trick or treating stops, you have sung outside the window of a loved one transitioning from this life, you have allowed folks into your kitchen as you Zoom from the dining room table. All these actions have been hospitality.

The second step in our blueprint of care is honesty. Simon and Andrew, and presumably the others in their household, did not hide that one among them was ill. I'm sure many of us can relate to having to make the choice about whether we let people into our most intimate family situations: those moments when we've just had an argument on the way to a party, when we need a mental health day, when a family member isn't being kind, when we are grieving and feel unfit to be around others. Simon and Andrew's household did not ask Jesus to wait until a better time to come and be with them, until their home was clean or they had abundance to share with their guests. Instead, they were honest. The household was welcoming to Jesus and the disciples, laying open their situation and inviting them to see their whole selves. The honesty gave way to vulnerability, to the acknowledgement that they don't have everything together.

And Jesus was present with them in their vulnerability, and present with Simon's mother-in-law in her time of illness. This is the third element: presence. Willingness to just BE together, willingness to brave the vulnerability of being human and being connected with one another. When Jesus went to this unnamed woman's side, he lifted her up. He was not worried about becoming ill himself by his proximity to her, instead choosing

to hold her hand. Sometimes a touch as simple as holding a hand can express presence better than words can.

Noted Quaker Parker J. Palmer writes this in a memorable article reflecting on his first bout with clinical depression many years ago, “Here’s the deal. The human soul doesn’t want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed – to be seen, heard and companioned exactly as it is. When we make that kind of deep bow to the soul of a suffering person, our respect reinforces the soul’s healing resources, the only resources that can help the sufferer make it through.” (<https://onbeing.org/blog/the-gift-of-presence-the-perils-of-advice/>)

In the last verse of this short passage, we find the fourth element of community care: healing. The story says that the woman’s fever went away, so maybe this involves physical healing. But bodily healing is complicated, and does not always come in the ways we expect. So maybe spiritual or relational healing also took place, so that the woman could again fill her place in the family. Though we may not understand the ins and outs of what healing happened, *something* important took place because this unnamed woman ministered to Jesus and the disciples. The one who was at the mercy of others, in a marginal position, ministered to those who did the healing.

And friends, this is the crux of community care: the radical upheaval that comes with hanging around with Jesus. Sometimes we think it’s not possible for us to make an impact in the world: we are sick, we are not enough, we are busy, we are anxious, we don’t know what to say, etc. But when we can get rid of that fever that clouds the image of who we are as inherently beloved by the Holy, even for a moment, we are able to minister to each other.

When we practice community care, we must be prepared for our understanding of power to shift. Our preconceived notions about who is the helper and who is the receiver of help may be challenged, or blown out of the water entirely. People with privilege may feel used to being the most powerful in a room, understanding themselves as the ones with the social, economic or material abundance to be beneficent towards others. And people who are struggling with mental illness, addiction, chronic pain, or

social marginalization, the ones who feel like (and are made to feel like) they don't have it all together...they might struggle to see themselves as being capable of blessing others, because they are so often pushed aside, or so often expected to gratefully receive.

But, beloved church, miraculous things can happen when we have a healthy ethic of community care. As we see in this simple, three verse story, sometimes when we go to show up for someone or to be with someone in their time of need, they flip the script, they bless us, they are the ones ministering to us.

This is what the kin-dom of God is like, community care brought about by hospitality, honesty, vulnerability, presence and healing. The kin-dom of God is experienced when we leave our expectations of who is more or less privileged, our expectation to be on top, our expectation to not have much to offer ... whatever these expectations are, we can leave them behind and be open to the surprising reversal of ethics in God's kin-dom. Recently departed Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "There is no distinction between the one who gives, the one who receives, and the gift itself." (<http://www.bloomingheart.org/index.php?page=mindfulness-practices>)

Community care takes all of us. We must be open to the roles that are asked of us. And, we must be open to those roles shifting; sometimes we are the ones ministering and sometimes we are the ones being ministered to.

You know that metaphor of the cup, and the capacity for sharing what you have? You cannot pour from an empty cup? Often we hear this said in times when we are spending lots of effort on caring for others and very little effort in caring for ourselves. And so it's true—you can't pour from an empty cup! But you must also be open to having others pour their time, energy, love and resources into your cup. Receiving generosity does not always come easily to people who are used to being the caretakers, and so it is important to reconcile with the truth that no one is ever the one who is always providing or giving, who is always in the privileged position of sharing abundance. We need each other and that is ok. Sometimes in our lives we need someone to rely on, we need someone to care for us or minister to us. We must be open

to that—it's not only us letting someone care for us, but allowing a family member, a friend, a spouse, a loved one, a neighbor, have that opportunity to extend care.

Beloved church, today is Annual Meeting Sunday. I assume some of us are excited for this meeting, eager to learn more about the future of this church and where we are headed as a congregation. And I assume some of us are not really sure what we have to offer, or how we can gift our presence to this community. But I encourage you to all show up, because we should never underestimate the power of being present. Yes, even in a church business meeting, even staring at a Zoom screen.

Over this past year, many of you, here in person and joining us online, have showed up for each other—offering hospitality, honesty, vulnerability, presence and opportunities for healing to each other. At times you may have been surprised at your role in the community—maybe you were used to caretaking and being the giver and organizer, and maybe you found yourself receiving the generosity of others' time and effort. Or, maybe you kinda hang around the edges of this congregation, trying to find a place where your gifts and skills may be put to use—and then over this past year, you really came forward into serving the church through spending time on task forces, as an usher, in the choir, or on the Diaconate. Friends, as we go into our Annual Meeting this afternoon, we have an opportunity to practice this ethic of community care. We will share stories of where we have been this year, and share visions of where we may go. We will join together with a spirit of hospitality, making space for each other to be vulnerable and honest. We will be present with one another and share our gratitude for the ways we have shown up for each other in 2021. And we will offer each other opportunities for healing, as we engage in challenging and important conversations and seek a way forward—together, which is the best way we know how.

Beloveds, I pray that you know that you don't always have to have it together. I pray that you know there are others who will show up for you in your time of need. I pray you find a balance in your life, so that you have opportunities to care and to be cared for. I pray you will feel held in the arms of the Holy through the words and actions of this church as we minister *to* each other and *with* each other. For we are a caring community, and I know,

deep in my bones, that together we can light the flame of care in this world, offering hope and presence to those who need it.

May it ever be so. Amen.

Let us rise in body or spirit to sing In the Midst of New Dimensions, verses 1, 2, 3, 5.