

“Service to Others”

As we continue to look at Jesus’s ministry, today’s story comes from Mark 1:29-39. The people have been amazed at Jesus’ speaking in the synagogue. After the service ended, Jesus went with his friends to Peter’s house. They told him that Peter’s mother-in-law was sick. Jesus went to her, took her by the hand and raised her up. As discussed by the commentator William Barclay, this miracle tells us something about three people.

First, this story tells us much about Jesus himself. To set up the historical context for what Jesus did, we must understand that there were many exorcists and purported healers in Jesus’ day. He was not the only one who tried to heal people. These others used elaborate incantations, formulas, spells and magical apparatus. The difference with Jesus was that he used one word of authority and the healing was complete, just as in the synagogue. He ignored the magical formula of the day and with power he healed the woman. Jesus possessed what is known in Greek as *exousia*, unique knowledge along with unique power.

Jesus did not need an audience to exert his power. He healed within the confines of a home, with few present. He was never too tired to help. The needs of others took precedence over his need to rest. He helped by instinct because he was interested in all who needed help.

Because of the demands of the crowd, Jesus was left with no time alone. He could get worn out. He must over and over again summon spiritual reinforcements to His aid. Jesus provides a model for us as we do His work on earth. He knew he could not live without prayer. He knew that if He was to meet and serve persons, he must first meet God. This is why He got up before sunrise and went to a place where he could be alone in prayer. Think about this: if prayer was necessary for Jesus, how much more must it be necessary for us.

Second, this story tells us something about the disciples. They had not known Jesus for long, but they already knew they could tell him about their troubles. The Jewish custom of that day was that the main Sabbath meal came immediately after the synagogue service, at the sixth hour of the Jewish day, that is twelve o'clock noon. They were going to have the meal but Peter's mother-in-law, who would serve the meal, was sick. The disciples told Jesus immediately about her sickness.

The disciples' attitude provides us with a model. Paul Tournier, a medical doctor, shares how he learned from an elderly pastor about Jesus, "He is a friend whom I can discuss everything that happens in my life. He shares my joy and my pain, my hopes and fears." When a patient is gone, I can talk to Him about it. This is the essence of the Christian life. As the hymn says, "Take it to the Lord in

Prayer.” Early on the disciples learned what would become the habit of a lifetime--
-to take all their troubles to Jesus and to ask His help for them.

The third person this story tells us about is Peter’s wife’s mother. No sooner was she healed that she began to attend to their needs. She cooked a meal and served them. She used her recovered health to serve them. Jesus helps us so that we may help others.

As discussed by Victoria Lynn Garvey, a biblical scholar and lay leader in the Episcopal church, I suspect that, given our experience with COVID-19 over the last year, we all have a lot more interest in health, as well as a longing to regain a kind of normalcy and a sense of community that simply cannot be satisfied by virtual gatherings. Our shared calling to serve others has, if not halted entirely, been hampered by restrictions on gathering. As Ms. Garvey discusses in this week’s *Christian Century*, we must appreciate the full extent of Jesus’ healing. When he heals someone from disease, he always restores them not only to health but to full life. So, the several folks in this chapter of Mark today and beyond, possessed by demons or spirits or otherwise indisposed, will return to their families and neighbors whole and sane, but they will also be enabled to pick up their lives and practice again as full members of their communities.

Throughout the first chapter of Mark, Jesus' deeds left the people thunderstruck and astonished. In the synagogue, Jesus had commanded an unclean spirit to come out of a man. In today's passage we read that he threw out many demons. Throughout the gospels we meet these people who have unclean spirits and who are possessed by demons or devils. What is behind this? The Jews and the ancient world believed strongly in demons and devils. According to Jewish belief, demons could eat and drink and beget children. They were numerous. They were present to work harm. There was a demon of blindness, a demon of leprosy, and a demon of heart disease.

As discussed by William Barclay, it does not matter whether we believe in the existence of this demonic world. It does not matter whether we believe in demons or not. The point is that the people of the New Testament did. Some today still believe in the presence of demons as the cause of many problems. And the point is that the reign of the Messiah, Jesus, was to be the end of demons and their harmful effects.

We are aware of the spiritual dimensions of healing. Serious mental illness, even when controlled by medication, strains the resources of family and friends. Sometimes we might think it would be easier to attribute such afflictions to

demons than to endure dashed expectations accompanying each new type of therapy and/or the lurking fear of suicide of a loved one or close friend.

The COVID pandemic has increased the problems of depression and anxiety. The isolation needed to combat the spread of the virus has resulted in more emotional and mental problems. We are clearly in need of the healing power of Jesus. And that power is great. When Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, he does not simply heal her but he raises her up. The same word used to describe her raising up is used to describe Jesus' own resurrection. "Raising up" is not simply a description of a physical movement but it is an implicit invitation to do the work of God.

Her response to being raised up is variously translated: "she waited on them," "cooked for them," "served them." It has been widely noted that the Greek term for her action is the word from which we derive the word *deacon*. As you know, deacons in the United Methodist Church are those ordained in ministries who serve others.

Today, in the world in which we live and move and have our being, service is often a term for jobs of inferior rank: servers, sanitation workers, service stations, hotel workers, grocery workers. During the pandemic, we have come to realize how necessary these jobs are and how those in them have been adversely

affected by the virus. Maybe we now put more value on these jobs of service and no longer look down on them.

The Jesus we meet in the Gospels taught us two centuries ago the importance of service. Jesus, who “did not come to be served but to serve,” teaches us that service is the higher, even the highest calling (e.g. Mark 10:42-44). To serve others for the sake of others is the mark of true discipleship.

Jesus also teaches us that he was a man of action, not just words. He produced results. The people flocked to him because they recognized in Him a man who could do things. We also must recognize that Jesus never separated soul and body. Ministries to those who have not heard the good news of Jesus Christ do not only take the Bible; they take education and medicine and other meeting of human needs. It is incorrect to talk about the social gospel as if it were an extra to the Christian message. As John Wesley taught us in his ministries, the Christian message is one message which preaches and works for the good of a man’s body and the good of his soul.

Jesus also never separated *earth and heaven*. As Barclay stresses, there are those who are so concerned with heaven they forget all about earth and so become impractical visionaries and idealists. There are those who are so concerned with earth they forget about heaven and who limit good to material good. The dream of

Jesus was a time when God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus' dream was a time when earth and heaven would be one.

As we close today, let us reflect on the meaning of service as we see the example of Peter's mother-in-law. Like others who were touched by Jesus---like John's woman at the well or Luke's older brother of the prodigal son or Matthew's Magi---we don't know anything about this woman's further ministry, only this tantalizing hint about its onset.

We do not even know this woman's name, but this does not mean she is unimportant. What we do know is that, having been touched by Jesus, she is raised to the new, high calling of serving others, even before His so-called inner circle learns about it. She gets up, newly healed, and she serves. As Ms. Garvey observes in her reflection of today's passage, this lady does not stop at verse 31. There was still much to her story in her life. When you were touched by Jesus, I am sure you did not stop your service to others. In this time of need and service to others, continue to do all you can to help and aid your fellow persons. There is still much to your story.