

Epiphany 5
Year B 2018

Mark 1:29-39

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.

Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

For a long time I heard this gospel passage and felt the anger and indignation rise up even before Simon's nameless mother-in-law had been presented to Jesus.

You see, there was a common practice, in the heart of the Midwest where I grew up, of using scripture passages to justify the belief that a woman's sole purpose in life was to serve every need of men.

Even if this meant rising from your sick bed before recovering from any ailment to meet the demands and desires of men.

We recognize this as "biblical literalism" and, thankfully, do not practice that in this community.

But for many, then and now,
it wasn't just a way of interpreting scripture.

A way of looking back
at the different translations over time
to tease out what the gospeler was
saying to the community at the time.

For many "biblical literalists,"
passages of holy scripture are fact
and are not open to interpretation.

They fail to recognize that,
they in fact,
are attributing their own interpretation to scripture
which may or may not
comport with the majority of scholarship.

Let me be clear, I am sure there
are times, as hard as we all might try,
that we do this as well.

But where I really feel anger
is when these literal translations
are used in ways to demean,
oppress and abuse.

And for years,
this was what I knew of this passage.

It was this interpretation that
because Jesus had healed Simon's mother-in-law
she was obligated
to become this servile creature
bowing and scraping to meet the needs of Jesus,
his disciples, and all men
that stuck in my craw
as my grandmothers used to say.

And let me just clarify,
if you are not familiar with this saying,
things which stick in your craw
are definitely not good,
not meant to be ingested.

Yes, there are many hardworking farmers
in my lineage.

It was many years after I left the Midwest
that I began to study scripture
and the accompanying history
over which time scripture was
written, translated and translated again.

I learned that as new materials were discovered
new research was published.

That, in fact, holy scripture is not
Set in stone.

It is in fact, alive and available
in all times.

This means that it is important to note that for Mark, service is a central topic in the call and pursuit of Jesus.

In the words of commentator Ofelia Ortega:

Simons mother-in-law rises up and turns the Sabbath into a paschal day of service to others.

Jesus does not command her.

She is the one that assumes the initiative and awaits the consequences, while discovering the value of mutual service above the sacredness of the Sabbath.

Jesus' act of healing on the Sabbath was a direct pronouncement that God's good news was the relief of suffering for the oppressed, here and now.

There is nothing menial in the service Simon's mother-in-law provides to Jesus and others.

There is no difference in the service of Simon's mother-in-law and the service of Jesus to all those he encounters during his ministry.

The word serve comes from the greek verb diakoneo.

There are a range of translations for the diakoneo.

This is the same word we hear a few verses earlier in Mark 1:13:

He was in the wilderness forty days,
Tempted by Satan;
and he was with the wild beasts;
and the angels *waited* on him.

Angels surely are not engaged in menial behavior.

And then later in Mark 10:45 we hear the crux of the definition of diakoneo:

for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve

From Strong's Concordance #1247: the greek verb diakoneo (pronounced dee-ak-on-eh'-o)

from 1249; to be an attendant,

i.e. wait upon (menially or as a host, friend, or (figuratively) teacher);

technically, to act as a Christian deacon:

--(ad-)minister (unto), serve, use the office of a deacon.

Well, as you might imagine,
I have some familiarity
with diakoneo.

In fact, I've studied it, a lot.

I've had occasion to read a lot of material,
and I do mean a lot,
and actually written papers on diakoneo.

When used in the connection with
the acts of Jesus and discipleship,
it is **not** translated as menial work.

Commentator Ofelia Ortega offers:

*Simon's mother in law interprets the gift that she has received;
her service cannot be understood as
a woman's menial work
under the domination of lazy males,
but as a true messianic ministry.*

*This woman is Jesus' first deacon
and joins him in the radical announcement,
in action, of the Kingdom of God.*

The Kingdom in which the needs
of the suffering and oppressed are paramount.

The Kingdom of God revealed
in the gospel of Jesus Christ
has never been,
nor ever will be,
properly interpreted as any command
or example on the part of Jesus
to demean or denigrate,
or to cause one to suffer,
or to oppress.

Jesus' act to relieve the suffering
of Simon's mother-in-law on the Sabbath,
knowing the backlash that would ensue,
is proof that he has come to serve.

Jesus and Simon's mother-in-law serve,
not in response to a command,
but instead,
out of the understanding that the Kingdom of God
is the good news come amongst God's people.

And in fact,
today's gospel continues with
Jesus healing all those in need that evening:

*As night fell the sick
and those possessed with demons
were brought to him.*

And the whole city was gathered around the door.

The proclamation is that God's Kingdom is for everyone.

Today's gospel continues
the next morning when Jesus tells the disciples:

*Let us go to the neighboring towns
so that I may proclaim the message there also;
for that is what I came out to do.*

Diakoneo

Did Simon's mother-in-law
join the disciples
as Jesus made his way to Jerusalem?

Did she continue to serve
while travelling with the group
or did she remain behind to
serve those with whom she lived?

We don't know.

Later, Mark's gospel does state:

There were also women looking on from a distance.

*These used to follow him and
provided for him when he was in Galilee;
and there were many other women
who had come up with him to Jerusalem.*

Mark 15:40

Was the first deacon there?

I choose to believe she was.

I choose to believe that
She responded to God's call to
proclaim the good news
in thought, word, and deed
and followed Jesus to Jerusalem
serving those in need along the way.

What does today's gospel mean for us
here today, in this place, in this time?

Are we actively proclaiming
the Kingdom of God is here amongst us now?

Are we proclaiming the
good news to those who
so desperately need to hear
that they are loved?

Are we able to believe
that the Kingdom is here and now
in the midst of uncertainty, fear and division?

Clearly, we are all not called to the order of deacons.

But we are all called to discipleship.

We are called to serve.

We are invited to discern
how we are living into the Kingdom of God.

How our lives show forth
Jesus' life of service and discipleship.

Just as Simon's mother-in-law
was invited to discern her call to discipleship
so we are also.

In the words of commentator Karoline Lewis:

The story of Simon's mother-in-law is her call to discipleship story.

*Too often Jesus' restoration of those he meets,
those he seeks to heal and to save,
is reduced to a one-sided narration
of justification for Jesus' divinity
or an equally one-sided account of our anticipated response.*

*Yet, Jesus doesn't heal just to heal,
just to prove himself,
or just to confirm God's activity in the world.*

*Jesus heals for the sake of,
because of,
and assuming that the Kingdom of God is here
-- and that we are a part of it,
that we have a role in it,
and Jesus needs us.*

Jesus need us.
All of us.

Are we ready to serve?