

Epiphany 5

Year B 2021

Mk 1:29-39

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

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

Amen.

In today's gospel,
Jesus, straight from the synagogue,
begins his ministry of healing.

And in Mark's gospel,
this is the first of several notable healings of women.

Andrew and Simon take Jesus to their home
and inform Jesus of the condition of Simon's mother-in-law.

Jesus takes her hand,
and raises her up,
which is the more accurate interpretation,
and the woman is healed.

Jesus raised her up and restored her.

Restored her to her rightful place in community.

Now this is important.

I can't tell you how many times
I've heard this particular gospel passage
preached with apologies about the next line in the passage:

"...and she began to serve them."

Sermons that draw our attention away from
The critical message contained in Jesus' act of healing and,
instead, direct us to our own insecurities
and sensitivities about the role of women well over 2000 years later.

Simon's mother-in-law regained her status
and was restored to her family and community.

We do a great disservice to the import of this healing
if we spend time trying to unpack
our superimposed values of a woman serving men.

Consider this, if you will,
Simon's mother-in-law,
As well as Simon and Andrew,
Are humble people,
Without riches, power, or status,
Except for how they provide
For their family and their community.

To be sick in that time stripped women and men of their status.

Such individuals oftentimes were believed
to be impure, sinful, or cursed
thereby bringing shame and exclusion to their families.

For an older woman to be sick
in a poor and marginalized household
was a huge burden on the whole family.

It was not unusual for women,
such as Simon's mother-in-law,
to be cast aside, avoided,
or even left to fend for themselves
in a time when they most needed
the support of their family and community.

Jesus enters the home and is told at once
of the condition of Simon's mother-in-law
and He immediately recognizes the danger.

Jesus walks to the woman,
takes her hand and raises her up.

Jesus' actions were completely unheard of and
dangerous to himself and all those that were following him.

His response to Simon's mother-in-law
was also the most humble
and authentic act of self-sacrificing service
anyone would have seen from a stranger in that day and time.

Strangers would not have entered the home
of a sick person.

Strangers,
if they found themselves in a house with a sick person,
most certainly would not have gone near,
let alone touch, a person who was sick.

Strangers, most assuredly,
would not have done any of these things
if the sick person was an older woman.

And yet, Jesus,
who proclaims he has come to serve, diakoneo,
does just that.

Diakoneo to serve.

Service which is self-sacrificing.

Service which is primarily, but not exclusively,
directed to the most vulnerable, underserved, and ostracized.

Jesus' act of healing Simon's mother-in-law epitomizes diakoneo.

Simon's mother-in-law,
having been raised up and healed,
in turn, engages in her own act of diakoneo.

To serve the One who has made her whole,
restored her to her family and community,
and allowed her to engage in acts
which evidence to her family and community
her immense worth.

This passage shows us, here in our time,
as it did to the original hearers of this gospel,
that Jesus sides with the least.

That Jesus is here to serve the poor, the sick,
those who have been shunted aside
and separated from society as a whole.

Jesus' actions directed to the poor and oppressed
show us the enormity of the need during his ministry.

We read or hear gospel after gospel
wherein Jesus is confronted with masses of the needy.

Today we hear, "...the whole city was gathered around the door."

Elsewhere we hear of:

- feeding the crowd of five thousand;
- the time the crowd blocked the door so that
the roof was removed and
the paralytic man was lowered down to Jesus; and
- the time the crowds were so intense that Jesus had to retreat to a boat.

Crowds of those being left behind
as the rich grew richer and more powerful.

I would offer, a time not that different from our current circumstances.

The rich grow exponentially richer
while the poor are becoming poorer,
sicker and dying in unequal proportion;
less able to access quality healthcare;
unable to find jobs with adequate pay,
to realize equal access to education;
and continue to lose their homes, families and communities.

What can we take from our lessons today
that might help us to see a way forward?

In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth
he speaks of proclaiming the gospel.

He says of the gospel of Jesus Christ:

"....that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge..."

I may proclaim the gospel freely.

We proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ,
Individually, and as the community of St. Andrew's.

Today we heard in the gospel of Jesus Christ
that we are to be of service to the poor,
disenfranchised, ostracized, and sick.

We have everything we need
to direct us in living into
and out of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How best might we freely proclaim the gospel
not just in our words
but in our actions as well.

Words surely are important
in helping to make known the disparities,
the needs, and the injustices of our neighbors.

However, what we see throughout
Jesus' ministry is words alone are not enough.

We see throughout Scripture that
Jesus' actions served as a form of proclamation as well.

A proclamation of diakoneo.

We see Jesus feeding, healing, restoring,
and reclaiming the lost, the marginalized,
the ostracized, the wounded, and the discounted.

As followers of Jesus Christ,
as Christians,
as those who proclaim the Gospel of Christ,
we also must act.

We are called to diakoneo.

To self-sacrificing serve.

How might we come to the aid of
our neighbors who exist on the streets beyond these walls?

How might we engage in acts of
mercy and justice which will lead to healing?

How might we best serve the ostracized and marginalized?

How will each of us engage in diakoneo?

How will we live lives dedicated to self-sacrificing service?

In the words of commentator Osvaldo Vena:

How will we focus our ministry on those who will not be able to repay us?