

Simon's Mother-in-Law **Sermon on Mark 1: 29-39**

Everyone loves it when Jesus shows up. In him God is meeting his people... His presence makes a difference. Things happen. Mother-in-laws are healed. The sick are cured. Demons are cast out.

After I did my first sermon-preparation read through of this gospel passage I thought, "There are two stories here." Then I thought, "No, there are three." And then I realized that there are really more stories here than I can count.

Mark, of course, is interested in telling only one story, Jesus' story, and so he gives us these glimpses into the lives of others only insofar as they serve to move his main story along.

We haven't even reached the end of chapter one yet, and already Jesus has been baptized in a river, heard the voice of God, spent forty days in the wilderness tempted by Satan and waited on by angels, called his first four disciples, taught in a synagogue, cast out a demon, and - in today's bit - healed a woman in a private home, gone back out into the wilderness to pray, and then travelled throughout the region preaching in more synagogues and casting out more demons.

And Mark tells us all of that in only 39 sentences. Mark probably would have failed a creative writing class and definitely would have failed a journalism class! He hasn't even come close to answering those all important questions known to every reporter and every novelist on the planet:

Who? What? When? Where? How? And Why?

Mark hasn't come close to answering them because he doesn't care; unless those are questions about Jesus, Mark simply isn't interested in them.

But I am! I would like to know some details. I'm like Karoline Lewis, an American theology professor, who in writing about Simon's mother-in-law repeatedly makes the remark, "I so wish she had a name!"

I would love to know her name too.

In fact, not only would I like to know who she is, I'd like to know what she's doing there! Why is she in Simon's household at all?

Is she there because she's widowed and, bound by the law of Moses to be dependent on some man?

Is it possible that she has no male relatives other than her daughter's husband to rely on for support?

Is she there because Simon's widowed and needs her help to raise his children?

Are there any children to raise?

Why is Simon's mother-in-law the one who - after arising from her sickbed - performs the duties of hostess which normally would be those of a wife or an elder daughter?

And why was she sick in the first place?

What was actually wrong with her?

There are more stories here than I can count because Mark hasn't told them. He simply mentions bits and pieces which make me curious and let me ask more questions than Mark will ever answer.

Mark isn't interested in answering the questions; the answers aren't necessary to moving *his* story of Jesus along, but they would help me in understanding *my* story of Jesus.

I know I'm not very much like Jesus, though I try to be; I am, however, a lot like those other people, like Simon or his mother-in-law or that man in the synagogue or those looking for Jesus everywhere or those bringing their sick to him...

If I could know more about how they related to and followed Jesus, it would help me as I stumble along trying to do the same.

I wish we knew more about the nameless Mrs. Simon's mother.

I wish Simon's wife had a name and her mother too! ...because it would help me understand this statement: "The fever left her, and she began to **serve** them."

I read that statement and my women's liberation, gender equality heart just goes all cold and still, and I think, "**Really?** The first thing an elderly woman does on being relieved of sickness is get up and cook for the men?"

But, I must admit, that's *my* story, not Mark's; that's me reading *into* the text, instead of setting aside my preconceptions and letting the text read *out* to me. If I read the text carefully and in the context of the whole story of Jesus my gender-equality objections may not entirely fade away, but at least they are answered a bit.

Here is how

First, there is the way Jesus seems to have refused to confirm the status quo of women in first century Jewish society.

In the Palestine of Jesus' day, women were subordinated to men; they had no rights of their own; they could not own property; they were completely dependent upon the eldest male member of their family - which is one reason why Simon's mother-in-law may have been living in his household.

But we should remember that Jesus would have none of that!

Jesus spoke openly with women when that was absolutely contrary to the norms of his culture as, for example, when he discussed theology with the woman at Jacob's well or when he prevented a crowd from stoning the woman caught in adultery.

Jesus believed that a woman had as much right to discuss theological issues with him as a man might, as he allowed Mary of Bethany to sit at his feet and listen to what he was saying.

Jesus allowed women to whom he was not related to touch him, when - in the home of another Simon - he allowed a woman known to be a sinner to anoint his feet, or when Mary of Bethany did the same just before his crucifixion.

Would Jesus, who seemed to value women as the equals of men, have allowed an elderly woman to wait on him in a subservient manner?

I don't think so.

Second, there's that word "serve." In this passage the translation of the Greek original is not incorrect, but it's a certainly a loaded one! A 21st century Christian woman like myself hears inequality in that word "serve;" I hear a disparity in social position between the one who serves, the servant, and the one who is served, the master. I cannot shake the sense that the one serving is subservient, and that is especially so when reading the Bible in English or German translation.

There are a couple of Greek words which I needed to look at really closely.

The Greek has two different words which are both translated into English by using the word "to serve".

One is *douleuo*; its root is *doulos*, a noun meaning "slave."

One who serves in the sense of *douleuo* serves as a slave serves. Jesus frequently uses this as a metaphor for the Christian life. When, for example, he said, "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master," it is this word *doulos* that he uses; not simply "servant," but "slave."

And that is what we hear, what we understand when we read this word "serve" in English translation. We hear it here:

Simon's mother-in-law rose from her sickbed and like a subservient slave she waited on these men.
Except she didn't!

That's not what the Greek says even though that's how we hear it when the second of the Greek words is translated as "serve" too.

The second word to serve, used in this passage, is *diakoneo*. As a noun, the word is *diakonos*. The verb means "to minister;" the noun here is the root of our word "deacon."

This is not the talking about the submission of a slave. When Mark, or any of the gospel writers, uses this term, something very different is intended: here equals are "ministering" each other, helping each other, leading each other, supporting each other, deciding together and living with each other.

It does help to look at other instances where Mark uses the word *diakoneo*; he uses the word only four times! The first is when Jesus is in the desert for forty days and Mark tells us that "the angels waited on him." (Mk 1:13)

The second is in today's gospel reading.

The third is when Jesus tells his disciples, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." (Mk 10:45)

The last is when Mark describes those who were present at Christ's crucifixion: "There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Salome. 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." In that last passage, the word translated "provided for" is *diakoneo*.

This then is the sort of "serving" Simon's mother-in-law does: ministering to Jesus and his disciples in the manner of the angels, serving as Jesus himself came to serve, providing for Jesus and the others as the women at the cross had provided for him.

An Episcopal nun and priest, Suzanne Guthrie, writes in an essay on Simon's mother-in-law, "Something more than healing occurs when Jesus 'touches' her. The word used is the same as the word for Jesus' resurrection – he 'raises her up'. In her healing is something of the Easter mystery of resurrection and something of the Pentecost mystery of apostleship – of service. She's a mother of the church. A deacon. A role model of holiness. And when she gets healed this healing has consequences for the whole community."

This is one of Mark's favourite themes: Healing an individual always has consequences for the society in which the individual lives.

Mark's gospel invites us to look for experiences of resurrection in everyday life in the lives of families and in the social and political order. A serious fever is equivalent to death if one cannot do what is human to do, to serve, to feed, to provide for. To be released from illness and restored to oneself, means one can be responsible, useful, helpful, supportive, a friend...

Repairing bonds in family and community is a dimension of resurrection.

In Mark's gospel there is no "individual" healing, his stories of healings always repair relationships and help the community to function as such.

A son is healed and happiness given to the father, a daughter is healed and life becomes easier for the mother, and here, a mother figure is enabled to care for family and friends and become a leader in the community. Even the woman alone in the crowd with no family left to her... when she touches Jesus, when she is healed, becomes "daughter" – Jesus calls her daughter and gives back to her a place to belong, a place in the family of God.

The Cuban theologian Ofelia Ortega observes and writes, "This woman gets up and turns the Sabbath into Easter and a feast of life and freedom: full of service to others. Jesus does not command her. She is the one who takes the initiative and discovers the value of mutual service above the sacredness of the Sabbath. She is a revolutionary."

This is the story Mark does not tell.

Mark is interested only in moving forward his tale of Jesus, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, so he does not give us any details about other people in other stories which he considers less significant or not so important because they do not serve the intention he has as a gospel writer and teller.

If we want to learn from those other stories, we have to find out the details ourselves.

We need to study the culture and sociology of the New Testament times carefully.

We have to read Mark's brief mention of other people along the way within the larger contexts of Mark's whole story and the gospels of the other evangelists.

When we read the story of Simon's mother-in-law in this way, we find much more than the story of a subservient first century woman merely doing what was expected of her. We learn about the ministry of a woman who many

theologians called “the first deacon of the church,” who rose restored from her sickbed, was made well and whole by the Son of God, and offered herself in service to others.

And just in a side note: whenever Jesus was in Capernaum later in his public life, it was her house, the house where Simon’s mother-in-law lived, in which he stayed. So she had become someone like a leader, a teacher and a housemother...

Seeing her from this point of view makes us even more curious to want to know more about her: as Professor Lewis said, “I so wish I knew her name.” And I can only add, I so wish I knew what she looked like, what clothes she wore, what things she liked best, what she believed in and hoped for and dreamed of...

I wish I knew what relationship she had with her daughter and her grandchildren, how she went to sell her bread and vegetables in the market and took the money to buy some fish from the fishermen...

I wish I knew what she cooked in the evenings, and how they sat together when guests came...

I wish I could hear her stories of her friendship with Jesus, and the ways she encouraged others in their faith in God...

I wish she’d become a friend. And I’d call her Sarah. I’d see in her a great woman of God.

And I so hope that as such she can teach us all to live our lives as people of faith, to see each other as equals and to wait on each other as angels would... Amen.

Silence

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God
who created us from nothing
and goes on bringing to birth
new things beyond our imagining.

We believe in Jesus Christ
who entered our unknown journey
and experienced all our living,
who walked in our earthiness
and can still be discovered
in our midst.

We believe in the Holy Spirit
who calls us on to truth
in light beyond our seeing,
who stirs within our being
like a melody of possible music,
who dances on before us
in the freedom of passionate life.
Amen.