

“Possession, Perception, and the Role We’re All Called to Fill”
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Based upon Mark 1:21-39; 1 Cor. 3:1-9

Last week we considered the story of the widow of Nain in the *Gospel of Luke*. This week, the Lectionary gives us another story about an unnamed widow, this time from *Mark*. The woman is not described as a widow; she is described only as Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. But it is safe to assume she was a widow because otherwise she would have been living with her husband, not with Peter. Mark doesn’t tell us much about this woman, or anything about her daughter, Peter’s wife, and where she was that day. According to *First Corinthians*, Peter used to travel with his wife when sharing the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:5), and according to 3rd Century historian Eusebius, Peter’s wife was a dedicated disciple who was by his side until the end of their lives.¹ She was martyred right before Peter was crucified upside down. But Mark isn’t interested in her in this story; he’s only interested in Peter’s mother-in-law, who was home with a fever. When Peter, Andrew, James, and John returned from the synagogue with Jesus, he went straight to the woman who was lying in her bed, took her by hand, and lifted her to her feet. In that moment, her fever left her, and immediately she began to serve them.

Oh, how those last five words of her story have incensed feminists for decades! This poor woman had been flattened for who-knows-how-long by a serious fever, one that Luke, the physician, describes in Greek in his own accounting of this story as a “mega” fever (Luke 4:38-39), and the minute she feels better, she has to get up to take care of her son-in-law and his buddies?! Only two paragraphs earlier those men were working professionals, able to haul in great catches of fish under all kinds of challenging circumstances. But now, they can’t make themselves some sandwiches or wash their own feet? Were they so convinced that cooking was “woman’s work” that they couldn’t even help when this woman was feeling too sick to stand?

Tormented by questions like these and unable to see this text through anything other than a modern, liberated perspective, feminist scholars have both slammed it for its seeming celebration of oppressive patriarchy, and launched a little hermeneutical gender war of sorts trying to redeem the mother-in-law from its clutches. She was a much better disciple than Peter, they observe. At least she contributed, unlike Peter, who responded to the crowds demanding healing by going to fetch Jesus instead of trying to deal with them himself. The mother-in-law is like all the other women in *Mark*, who consistently behave in more faithful ways than Jesus’ bumbling disciples do, feminist scholars also note. Jesus knew this about them and also recognized how they were marginalized, so he was quick to heal them. Thus, feminists argue, this isn’t a text showing that women should serve men, or a text which requires us to perpetuate traditional gender roles, it’s a text which simply illustrates that women are more faithful than men.²

¹ Eusebius, *The History of the Church* (New York: Dorset Press, 1965), 140. Quoting Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius reads: “We are told that when blessed Peter say his wife led away to death he was glad that her call had come and that she was returning home, and spoke to her in the most encouraging and comforting tones, addressing her by name: ‘My dear, remember the Lord.’ Such was the marriage of the blessed, and their consummate feelings toward their dearest.”

² For a summary of some of these arguments, see Smit, Peter-Ben, *Simon Peter’s Mother in Law Revisited Or Why One Should Be More Careful With Mothers-In-Law*, *Lectio Difficilior* (European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis), January 2003, at http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/03_1/smit.htm

Responding to these kinds of arguments, male scholars have noted that women's place was in the home back then and that hospitality was women's business. "Jesus wasn't oppressing her," they have argued, "he was enabling her to do her job." He wasn't putting her down; he was freeing her to do what society expected of her so she wouldn't be shamed. Anyway, she probably wanted to serve him because hospitality was a really big deal back then. She needed to be able to play hostess to feel like a good person and say thank you.

I admit that this particular healing story has bothered me for a long time for many of the reasons it has bothered feminist scholars. I much prefer Matthew's version because he changed the line "she served them," to "she served *him*." (Matt. 8:15). I have no problem with her serving Jesus, the man who healed her. But that being said, I don't think it is helpful, or really doing justice to this text and those which surround it, to reduce the mother-in-law's story to evidence about gender roles that we must embrace or reject. Chapter One in *Mark* is first and foremost about Jesus' authority and mission as he launches his ministry, not about gender. Moreover, to the extent that it does speak to the roles Christ desires for us, it does so in a way that transcends gender. The mother-in-law is a model for us, but not because she was a woman, did woman's work, or served men. She is a model because she responded to God's grace in Christ by serving others, something that we all are called to do.

But before we get to what she did, let's first consider more closely what Jesus did, not just in this story but in those which surround it as well, because he really is the focus of these texts, and because *Mark* consistently packaged stories together to convey big lessons that the individual stories could not convey on their own. At the time this series of events takes place, Jesus had announced that the Kingdom of God had come near or was at hand, and called four of his disciples. On the Sabbath, they all went to worship together at the synagogue, which is where the first healing takes place. After Jesus casts out a demon from a man there, the crowd perceives the miracle as an important teaching. "Jesus teaches as one with authority!" they say, before running home to tell others of what happened. The healed man does not say or do anything in this story, nor do Jesus' disciples.

Next, they head to Peter's house where Jesus again disregards Sabbath regulations in order to heal Peter's mother-in-law. Although *Mark* doesn't say so, *Luke* says Jesus "rebuked" her fever which suggests that perhaps people believed it too was caused by some kind of demon. Then, while she served them supper and the sun went down, crowds lined up outside Peter's door like the cars in the last scene of *Field of Dreams*, coming in search of miracles of their own. Jesus healed many of the people before going off to recharge in prayer by himself. When Peter came to tell him still more were waiting, Jesus rejected the idea of staying on in Capernaum, in favor of going to neighboring towns to share the good news there as well.

If we look at these stories together, keeping in mind the fact that Jesus' ministry was about proclaiming and embodying the Kingdom of God, we see in this chapter the Kingdom taking shape through Jesus' actions. His ministry begins in a religious setting, the synagogue, as one might expect. It is a public place, a place associated with God, and a place where he has authority over demons. The person he heals is male. Then Jesus goes to a private place, a home. By healing a woman there, Jesus demonstrated that the Kingdom does not favor one context over

another, one gender over the other, or one kind of problem over other. The Kingdom of God was not going to be limited to Capernaum either. Jesus wanted to take the good news everywhere to set people free, and he had the authority and power to do it.

Both the man in the synagogue and Peter's mother-in-law had physical conditions that caused public shame, the man because his spirit was "unclean," and the mother-in-law because her fever (whether caused by illness or demon) kept her from fulfilling the laws of hospitality. Jesus removed the shame in both cases, taking on a degree of shame himself for doing the healing on the Sabbath. In so doing, he embodied the values of the Kingdom he came to proclaim. His ministry was going to be one which brought people back to themselves, back to the people they were made to be, regardless of whether they were male or female, diseased or demon-possessed, known publicly or known privately. Jesus' ministry was going to boundary-breaking and shame-removing. Such was the scope of his authority and the breadth of the kingdom of God.

But if the mother-in-law's response to Jesus' healing touch was to start serving the disciples, does that mean that her God-given purpose in life was to be the servant of men? The answer is yes and no. She wasn't healed to be a maid to men because that's women's work or all women are good for, but through her healing, the mother-in-law was enabled to become the servant that disciples are called to be. Jesus makes this calling express later in Chapter 10 in *Mark*, when he says, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45). That word "serve," which describes both what the mother-in-law did after she was healed, and what Jesus said he and his disciples were called to do, is in the Greek, *diakone*, from which we get our word "deacon." A deacon in our denomination is an ordained officer in the Church who is called by God to a ministry of compassion, nurture, and community building.

In today's texts, however, the "deaconing" being described is not that of officers but of all disciples of Christ. Jesus used this term to describe his own ministry and Paul did as well in our other text for today. "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?" Paul wrote to the Corinthians who were constantly arguing about who was the greatest "*servants* through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each." (Italics mine). In the New Testament, discipleship and servanthood, or just plain "ministry" as it is also often translated, are terms used synonymously to describe the work that both men and women do in response to Christ. As Robert Greenleaf observed in his book *Seeker and Servant*, "The idea of servant is deep within our Judeo-Christian heritage. Servant (along with serve and service) appears in the Bible more than thirteen hundred times."³

Jesus was a servant leader. He never used his authority and power to boss people around or expected them to kiss his feet and/or beg for mercy. He used his power to empower others, and his authority to model humility, compassion, and grace. After his conversion, Paul also

³ As quoted in Prosser, Stephen, *To Be A Servant-Leader* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 5-6.

embraced humble servanthood over a ministry of domination. And in today's text, Peter's mother-in-law did too, in the sense that she responded to God's healing grace in Christ by humbly serving those around her. This is what we also are called to do too, and if you scroll down on this Facebook page, you will find a picture of the mission board at Prince of Peace, recently freshened up to show all the many ways you can do just that through the church. In the past year, many of the hands-on work we have done to help others has had to be reduced to providing financial assistance because of the pandemic. That's a shame because discipleship really is about human contact, about taking someone's hand and helping him or her rise, actually or metaphorically. There are so many who need to feel that the healing touch of love. But it's also a shame that we aren't all serving side by side regularly as we used to because serving others that way benefits us too in ways that I think many would find helpful right now, by giving us a valuable dose of perspective. When human beings are cut off from others as we have been for so long now, there is a tendency to become very inward looking, focusing on one's own problems and discontents more on than others. We need opportunities that reset our focus, or problems can develop.

Maybe you are feeling calm and loving and self-sacrificing right now— and I applaud you if you are. But much of what I have read, heard, and experienced lately suggests that we have moved into a stage of the pandemic that is not just dangerous in terms of catching the virus, but dangerous in terms of the health of our relationships too. Spouses, who are not used to spending 24/7 with each other, are turning against or pulling away from each other. Once loving relationships are being plagued by battles about gender roles and authority, and frustration is replacing compassion. Similarly, parents and children are getting snippy, critical, passive-aggressive, and irritable after months of working and learning together at home. One way to heal these fractures is through service. When we voluntarily choose to serve others out of love, compassion replaces contempt, and our eyes and hearts are opened to the needs and feelings of others. We become focused on what would help heal them, not just on ourselves. Studies have shown that voluntarily service lessens stress and lengthens lives— both of those helped and those serving.⁴ In effect, when we do as Jesus called us to do both in and outside of the home, we end up healing ourselves as much as others. Such is the way of the Kingdom.

Tony Campolo wrote years ago about a woman who was struggling with her own demons after a divorce.⁵ Since she had the means, her pastor suggested that she take a few months to go to Calcutta to help Mother Teresa. He explained that the people working with the poor in Calcutta always need extra help, and maybe she could find healing for her soul there as well. But when the woman wrote to Mother Teresa about joining her, she wrote back: "Find your own Calcutta! Love Mother Teresa." The woman realized then that she didn't have to go halfway around the world to find people in need of help and healing, or to find meaning and healing for her own life. There were people in her own neighborhood she could serve.

⁴ "Helping people, changing lives: The 6 health benefits of volunteering," Mayo Clinic Health System, May 18, 2017; retrieved from <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/helping-people-changing-lives-the-6-health-benefits-of-volunteering>.

⁵ Campolo, Tony, Stories that Feed Your Soul (Ventura: Regal, 2010), 171-2.

I don't know when the world will be safe enough for us to gather and serve side by side as we always used to do. But if you are getting stir crazy or cranky at home with your loved ones, or if you are looking for meaning in your life to replace fear, or if you, like the mother-in-law are simple bursting with gratitude for all that Jesus has done for you, my advice is to look for your own Calcutta, in addition to supporting the missions of this church from a distance financially. Find some hands-on way to bring help or hope or encouragement to someone else near or far. Do something special for a loved one. Send a card or leave a treat for your neighbor. Adopt a helping project as a family that you can all work on together. When we follow Jesus' boundary-breaking example offering help, compassion, respect, love, and grace to all, regardless of where we find them and who they are, then we become the people God made us and called us to be, and caste out all kind of demons in ourselves and others in the process. Thanks be to God that even now we can serve because God's Kingdom knows no bounds. Amen.