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Healed for Service
Mark 1:29-39
February 7, 2021

Since we will be spending time with Mark over this lectionary year, it might be helpful to know something about Mark the author. He is undoubtedly the John Mark who travelled with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. He was in fact a cousin of Barnabas. Mark was a Jewish Christian from Jerusalem. His mother was the Mary whose home was the centre for the gathering of the disciples. It was to her home that Peter went after his miraculous release from prison (Acts 12: 12ff) Mark was probably with Paul in Rome when Paul was imprisoned during the crisis under Nero. He became a vital supporter to Paul throughout his later ministry. He was also a close confidant to Peter and Mark's Gospel really became the voice of Peter's apostolic teaching and preaching. When we read Mark we are listening to Peter's account of Jesus and his ministry.

As William Lane's commentary reminds us: *It is therefore appropriate to label Mark a **witness document** that found its creative impulse in the early apostolic preaching of salvation through Jesus Christ.* The life situation out of which the gospel was written during the second half of the decade (60-70AD) was the crisis confronting the Christians in Rome during Nero's reign of terror. Some of the language of his Gospel that is not found in the others, reflects this fact. Think about his description of Jesus in the wilderness: ***and he was with the wild beasts...*** Only Mark describes Jesus' struggle this way, probably a reference to the killing of the Christians by wild beasts in Rome under Nero. Hiding away in the catacombs, Christians would have derived much solace from Mark's account of Jesus. And Mark became the model Gospel for both Matthew and Luke who followed his narrative structure and wording.

Back to our reflection on the passage before us in Mark. He moves us quickly from the synagogue to Peter's house which is close by. His mother-in-law is in bed sick with a fever so it is obviously concerning. Jesus is immediately called upon to minister to this situation. He stood by her bed,

took her by the hand, and helped her back on her feet. And miraculously she is healed; the fever left her! No Tylenol needed!

The word used “to raise her up” means **resurrected** which is a powerful reminder from Mark how God’s presence has truly come close in this man from Nazareth, as his opening sermon affirms: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near...* Mark wants us to know that his touch, this gently, compassionate touch of his hands shown here to Peter’s mother-in-law, still reaches out to us.

Some might find the next scene typical of a man-centered universe. We are told her immediate response to Jesus’ action was to begin to prepare the lunch. Simon Peter’s mother-in-law “served” immediately after having been raised. The verb is **diakoneo**, the same verb Jesus uses to describe the essence of his own ministry: *For the son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.* (Mark 10:45) It is “to serve” rather than “to be served” that characterizes his life. The word here is the same word used in Acts chapter seven when the Apostles chose some of their number to be deacons. The deacons were called to serve tables for the widows and needy. This will become the hallmark of Christian ministry, with food and hospitality high on the list of our calling.

But also seen from a different perspective, her action, getting up immediately to serve her guests will be a pattern for all Christians. Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is far from being an exemplar of a pathetic, un-liberated woman for whom serving men is her whole life. Rather she is the first character in Mark’s gospel who exemplifies true discipleship. We should note that it will be women like her who are the ones present at his death, who gather around the cross and Mark tells us: *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 15:41). This is not a description used of Jesus’ male disciples who famously do not quite “get it” within Mark’s gospel.

So, yes, many might bristle at the idea that a healed woman’s first response is serving lunch. Typical some would say of the gender discrimination found in the bible! Sarah Henrich’s commentary on this passage is helpful. She reminds us that illness bore a heavy social cost in Jesus’ day. In her situation she would not be able to contribute to the wellbeing of the household. She concludes: *For Peter’s mother-in-law her*

calling was to show hospitality to guests. Jesus restored her to her social world and brought her back to a life of value by freeing her from that fever.

Mark's readers obviously thought differently from us on the subject of demons, exorcisms and healings. The spirit world was as real to them as the physical. Each realm was closely interrelated, so much so that the realm of the spirits acted upon the physical and vice versa. Any sickness was seen as a bad influence of the spirits. Protection came from magic, idols, the gods, or a miracle worker. Mark's stories of healings and exorcisms tell us that Jesus is more powerful than evil and represents God's presence and power who sets people free and longs for our wholeness.

The new community founded on Christ is one in which healing takes place. People with all kinds of fevers: stress, alienation, physical diseases, mental and emotional breakdowns, family breakdowns, loss of every imaginable description; all come under the healing power of the new community in Christ. Through touch, prayer, good news, people are opened up to God and to one another.

I love Frederick Buechner's comment on this: *The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.* Out of gratitude we serve. We are brought into God's realm not simply to be part of a club but to serve one another and those we meet. We are freed from many things when God saved us, habits and attitudes, but more importantly we are freed "for" something. That **something** is what God is calling us to be involved in.

Can you and me imagine what God might have freed us to be **for** this week? We probably agree that we are to have lives of purpose and meaning. But what if that is only possible if we, like Peter's mother-in-law, get up and serve and become the deacons God has called each one of us to be in life. Each time we respond to the needs of the people and the world around us we are responding to God's call that is ours in Christ.

This has been my experience within the community of faith. I know we can all have bad experiences with church. But for me the positive, nurturing, healing powers of the new community founded on Christ has been powerful and life-giving. When I arrived in Canada I never felt so alone in my life. I had no connections other than my brother and family. But in church I found

a new family. Similarly, when I went to England to study it was the faith communities that provided the human connectedness and sense of belonging that no other club could provide. Wherever I have lived in Europe or North America it has been the one constant in my life.

I remember a similar experience in Geneva, Switzerland where I spent several weeks doing research for my degree. Even there, in a very different culture, even there I was welcomed into Christians' home for dinner and fellowship. I always remember with gratitude being invited for a family dinner by a Canadian working in Geneva, and who later was involved in the new United Church hymn book; being alone in the city made such fellowship and welcome such a blessing to me.

Let me ask you this morning, do you want to be made whole? If you are like me you come with physical maladies, debilitating stress, lack of faith, bitterness over past disappointments and personal failures, anger and hopelessness: all of which has diminished us. Many of us have been crippled by our experiences in life. We are invited to come afresh for healing to the one who is able to lift us up on eagle's wings, who is able to make us run and not be weary, who is able to heal all our diseases, forgives all our iniquity, redeems our lives from the Pit, who crowns us with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies us with good as long as we live, and who renews our youth like the eagle's. So sings the Psalmist, and so promises Jesus Christ.

In his own day, what cannot be denied is that Jesus' presence seems to have been magnetic. There is a winsomeness about Jesus. People loved to listen to him; they were attracted by his healing powers to be sure, but there's more to his popularity than that. His message, his compassion, and his willingness to touch the untouchable, along with his vibrant spirituality: all contributed to his appeal. I believe this is still true today. And we the body of Christ, the church, are to be just as winsome, just as compassionate, just as called to serve our neighbour, and just as attractive and vibrant. That's our challenge.

I wonder what possibly has God called you and me **from** and what has God called us **toward**. God has freed us to follow him, but also to serve our neighbour. And I wonder how well we are doing as church at being winsome. How well do we as a community of faith reflect the face of Christ to our neighbour, to all who enter our building, to all we meet?

Amen