

MARK 1:29-39--NRSV

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.³³And the whole city was gathered around the door.³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him.³⁷When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."³⁸He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Lifted Up

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Last weekend Anna strained something in her neck and was in so much pain she could hardly move. It began to be unbearable in the middle of the night and with a lot of Ibuprofen and cold and hot compresses and tears she made it till morning. We finally were able to get the pain under control and by Monday she could move freely again. She commented over and over again in the days that followed just how wonderful it was to be out of pain. I had to keep her from overdoing it so she wouldn't hurt herself again. The relief that came from being healed gave her energy to think creatively and also get back to serving and caring for her mom. She was incredibly grateful and thankful to be herself again.

Last week we watched Jesus as he cast out the unclean spirit from the man in the synagogue. We shared some of the ways in which we were, like that man, caught up with the things that possess us and keep us from living fully. And today the story continues. I know it's because of the pace of Mark's gospel, but I would love to know what the possessed man did after church that day, don't you? I wonder if he went to dinner with friends or family. What must the conversation have been like? Was there a lot of uncomfortable silence or were they all rejoicing that dad, brother, son, was back to his old self? Or was he? I wonder how he felt about what happened to him. Was he happy or sad? Was he tearful or laughing uncontrollably? Was he thankful? What was he going to do with the rest of his day and how was his life changed? Just wondering.

But Mark doesn't linger, does he? He moves the story right along and apparently, dinner is being served at Simon Peter's house and off we go. But something is not right. All is not well at home. Simon's mother-in-law (I guess he was married) is ill. In fact, she is so ill that she cannot get out of bed let alone host a dinner. She is not herself and maybe hasn't been for a long time. We really don't know much about her condition or whether she had been ill for a few days or a few years. We don't know her name or Simon's wife's name. There may have been some children running around as well. She was down with a fever of some sort and no help had been found.

Maybe Simon had no idea what Jesus could do until he saw him in action that morning healing the man at church and decided, "Hey, I need to bring Jesus to my house to take a look at mom." Who knows? At any rate, he did. Jesus came to where she was lying in bed and took her hand and healed her, restored her, lifted her up, gave her back not just the life she had, but perhaps, the life she longed for. The fullness of the life she dreamed of. Remember, when reading the Bible, the stories are almost always, '*more than*', they appear to be. And it is interesting that in this story of healing, of being lifted up, that mother began to serve them.

Now it is easy to overlook this simple moment in the story by thinking to yourself, “of course, she’s a woman and in this culture, women naturally served the men even if they had to get up off their death bed to do so.” When it comes to eating and feeding and hosting we naturally turn to the women in our lives. Living in the south we can appreciate that can’t we? That’s what women have done for decades, haven’t they? I know when we go to my mother-in-laws for a meal my wife is expected to make sure I have what I need at the table. If my tea is running low or if there is an extra helping of food, mother will always ask Anna to get it for me. (I cringe a little when this happens.)

I’m not complaining of course, but you understand how easy it is for us to think that this is what Simon’s mother-in-law should do as well. But what if her response was not one of duty but one of gratefulness? What if she had been ill for so long that she never thought she would be able to give of her talents again? What if she was so thankful to Jesus for what he had done for her that she chose to begin serving others and this meal was just a first step in a long list of things she would do for others for the rest of her life?

What if this is a story about how we respond to being made whole in Christ by living lives of service and thankfulness? That this is really another calling story? That, Jesus, comes to this woman who has no name, no rank, no power, no influence, and no status, completely dependent on others, a person laid low not only by a fever but by society and life, and lifts her up! Not so her life would continue the way it always had, but that it would be forever different. That God’s healing to her, God’s restoration, becomes her service to others.

David Lose commented this week by asking, “What did the man from whom the unclean spirit was cast out a week ago do after his healing? What did all the people Jesus heals in this week’s story do once they are freed from the various ailments of mind, body, and spirit that had captivated them? Some, I imagine, were simply so grateful to be made well – so grateful, that is, that they had been freed from something debilitating or destructive – that they returned as quickly as possible to their old lives and routines and relationships.

But some, I’m willing to bet, including Simon’s mother-in-law, recognize that they weren’t only freed from something, they were also freed *for* something, for lives of purpose and meaning and service and generosity and more.” When this woman serves after she is healed, she is neither being dismissed as somehow inferior to those she serves nor constrained to a lesser role. (That we interpret the story this way, I think, says more about us than it does either her or Mark.) Rather, Jesus has not only healed her but given her back her vocation which is, ultimately, a picture of discipleship. Indeed, the picture of discipleship: service.”

Seminary Professor Karoline Lewis added that “Simon’s mother-in-law does not serve because she has to, because she is compelled to, because someone asks her to, because that’s her supposed place. She serves because this is what discipleship looks like. She serves, showing us what following Jesus will really mean.”

This is what Jesus came to do, isn’t it? To make us whole again and give us lives worth living that we might serve others and share the good news! That we can all be whole. We can stop looking for love in all the wrong places and be restored to the fullness of life that God desires for us. Which is not about financial success or comfort but like Jesus, it is about serving others.

A couple weeks ago something happened in Charlotte that only happens once in a while in the South. It snowed! It snowed about 8 inches and it was magical, at least for the children. It also meant that they were out of school for several days which as we all know, can make parents just a little crazy. My daughter Emily is no exception. But being a teacher at heart she has an uncanny way of gathering the children in her neighborhood to do things together. For the last couple of years, she has gathered the kids to go Christmas caroling in the neighborhood. They practice a couple of times and then off they go. It is some of the loudest and off-key

singing you can ever imagine but the families love it and the children will always remember it with fond memories.

While they were out of school during the snow storm, Emily and a couple other moms decided to take several of the kids up to a soup kitchen in Mooresville. This group serves breakfast and lunch five days a week to those in need and on Wednesdays, they have a food pantry similar to our Feed My Sheep program, only several times larger. They probably serve a couple hundred folks. Emily and the kids went and helped set up tables and put the food out. Then they served those who came through the line. Now these are children from ages 6 to 10 who were helping the needy to fill or carry their boxes. They greeted everyone with respect and a smile and were eager to assist in any way they could. They worked from 11 to 3 in the afternoon and at the end of the day they were tired but so excited that they could serve and help others. They can't wait to go back when they have another day off and plan to be regular helpers this summer. I can't help but believe that these will be memories that shape their lives for the future. That the joy that comes from serving others is something they will cling to as they grow older...I hope so.

Jesus came, not to be served, but to serve. And that is probably one of the most important lessons we can take from this story today. That being called and set free by God is a call to serve others. And while healings and exorcisms may have been the exclusive purview of Jesus, the work of healing the spirit and soul continues as a gift to us when we live lives of thankful service to others. That we continue to lift others up because God lifted us up too. This is what discipleship looks like. This is what resurrection looks like. This is what being called looks like.

This healing, this restoration, reminds us and helps us see that the Kingdom of God is at work when all other evidence and experience seems to point to the contrary. And that we are a part of that story, we have a role in this story, and Jesus needs us. Karoline Lewis closed her commentary by saying. "As it turns out, and what Simon's mother-in-law reveals, is that this role looks an awful lot like how Jesus himself will describe his own ministry, his own power, and his own presence, "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).

Today as we come and share in Holy Communion we should be reminded even more deeply that Jesus came to serve. This bread and cup are symbols of his ministry of love and service to others and to you. And perhaps the last point to make in this story is this. Jesus doesn't stay for long in any one place to heal everyone or cast out all our demons. But he keeps moving on towards the one mystery that he knows will bring ultimate healing and that is his death and resurrection which is what brings real spiritual healing for us all. This too is what discipleship is about. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.