

Epiphany 5 Year B 2009

Texts: Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalm 147:1-12, 21c

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

“He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” Mark 1:31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

We don't know her name. This nameless woman, identified only by the relationship she has with her son-in-law, Simon Peter, is considered by many to be the first deacon of the church. We have learned as children that Stephen was the first deacon. He certainly was the first martyr... but this nameless woman really holds the title as first deacon.

This story follows right on the heels of last week's gospel. It is still the Sabbath. Jesus has been in the synagogue teaching. A man appears who is possessed with “an unclean spirit.” Jesus orders the spirit out of the man in the first of 4 exorcisms in Mark's gospel. Everyone is amazed at the authority that Jesus exudes and that even unclean spirits must obey him. As a result of this event Jesus' fame is spread throughout the region.

Jesus and the first disciples; Andrew, his brother Simon Peter, James and John leave the synagogue. They go to the house shared by Andrew and Simon Peter and are told that Simon's mother-in-law has a fever. Fevers in those days were serious things. There were no antibiotics, no Tylenol or Ibuprofen to take the fever down. People died of fevers every day.

Fevers were thought to be caused by spirits. And before we roll our eyes at this antiquated belief let's remember what it looks like to have a bad fever. People can become delirious. People sometimes talk and make no sense. They can become agitated and even aggressive. People can be burning hot on the outside and ice cold on the inside. Fevers, if uncontrolled, can lead to seizures. People with a bad fever can literally not be in their right mind.

We are not told how bad Simon's mother in-law's fever is. But I think it would be a fair bet that even if it wasn't awful, the fear that it could become awful was a legitimate concern. We do know that she felt bad enough to take to her bed, which says something right there. And we know that Andrew and Simon were concerned enough that they told Jesus immediately upon coming into the house about her fever.

Jesus goes into her, takes her by the hand "and lifted her up." The words "lifted up" are the same words used 14 chapters later to describe Jesus being hoisted onto the cross as well as the words used to describe the resurrection. That is not an accident. It is part of Mark's message to the early church.

It is also important to look at the sequence of events as told by Mark. Jesus comes, Jesus touches, Jesus lifts up and then Jesus heals her. That sequence of events also is no accident. It isn't until Jesus lifts her up that she is healed.

But what was she healed for? What happens after she is healed? We don't hear anything about what the man with the unclean spirit does after the spirit leaves him. But here we are given a clear message about what is to happen after healing. We are told, "the fever left her, and she began to serve them." Her healing led to her serving.

It may be tempting to look at this through modern eyes and think, "Geez, this woman feels terrible, she is just getting over a fever and now all they want is for her to feel well enough to get them dinner." To see it that way may be tempting, but it would also be wrong.

As the senior woman in the household it would be her responsibility to see that hospitality would be extended to their guest. Hospitality was one of the most important virtues in the Jewish faith. To welcome others was to welcome God.

This task of Simon's mother in-law was one of honor and graciousness. Jesus' healing of her restored her to that place of honor and graciousness that she held before becoming ill. Jesus' healing of her restored her place in the household and by extension, her place in the community. And she responds to her healing with service.

She truly is the first deacon, this nameless woman. Andrew, Simon Peter, James and John are the first followers of Jesus, but she is the first one to serve Jesus.

Verse 31 in Mark, “He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began serving them,” is the entire gospel in a nutshell.

Jesus comes to us, reaches out for us, lifts us up and heals us of whatever demons we are fighting, whatever sickness of heart or mind that might be consuming us. We are healed and restored and become part of the beloved community once more. And we are told in both word and deed that we are healed so that we may serve. We are healed not just for our own good, but also for the good of the world.

In verse 31 Jesus gives us the example we are to follow: we are to go to others, we are to reach out to them and by sharing the Good News of God in Christ we are to lift them up into the love and graciousness of God. That is what will heal, that is what will restore. By our serving others, others learn to serve as well.

Jesus is asking nothing of us that he himself is not asked to do. God comes and lives among us. God in his great love for us reaches out for us in intimacy. God’s love is so great that he is lifted up on the cross for us, to heal us, to heal the world. His life was one of service to us and to the Father.

Jesus shows us throughout Mark’s gospel that preaching leads to healing, healing leads to serving, and to complete the circle, serving leads to preaching the word once again. That is the circle of life; it is the circle of salvation.

And Jesus shows us where we are to do this. It is not only in church. Jesus does not leave his messiahship at the synagogue door. He goes into a house, a house where everyday life takes place...a house where children are born, raised, fed, and taught. A place where meals are prepared, guests welcomed, joys celebrated and sorrows shared. In other words, smack dab in the middle of our everyday lives we are to seek out, touch, raise up others into the love of God, and serve our Lord.

But Jesus' message of preaching and healing of service doesn't stop in the home either. Jesus takes his message to the surrounding community, into the neighboring towns so that "I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do."

Jesus could have stayed in one place and hung out his shingle as the Marcus Welby M.D. of Galilee. But that is decidedly not what he was to do. Jesus came to heal not just Jews, but Gentiles. He came to heal not just the nation of Israel, but the whole world.

There is no place we are not meant to share the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. We are to share it in our churches and homes, in our communities and in neighboring towns. We are meant to share it in familiar and unfamiliar places; in places where we are comfortable and in places we are decidedly uncomfortable.

We are to do this as healed men and women, as members of God's family that have been lifted up and served by Jesus Christ himself. Come, let us get up and serve all those we meet. Let us then go into the neighboring towns to proclaim the healing message of Jesus Christ because that is what we were healed to do.

Amen.