

## **Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**

**Jesus and four of his disciples stop off at Peter's home for a little dinner. Can't you hear the discussion beforehand? One of the topics was probably about how hungry they were and since there was no restaurant open on the Sabbath, why not stop at Simon Peter's home to get a little pick me up? Simon has been bragging about his mother in law's cooking. So all of the guys converge on the household. Lo and behold, they get there and she is sick and in bed. What does Jesus do? He cures her. And the fever leaves her and what does she do? She serves all of them, of course.**

**First, let's just claim that this story comes out of a patriarchal setting. I am not certain that even Jesus saw the irony in the tale. Mark certainly did not. But I do think that we can still play with this text. Peter's mother-in-law becomes the first woman who is healed by Jesus in Mark's gospel. She does model more than making brunch for her son-in-law's new friends. The *New American Bible* version of this story, translates: "Jesus approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her, and she waited on them."**

**The word translated as *helped* comes from a Greek word *egeiro* which means *to raise up*. This is the same word that Mark uses to describe Jesus' own resurrection. Before his arrest, Jesus promises, "After I am raised up I will go before you to Galilee." The young man in the empty tomb tells the three women who come to anoint Jesus' body, "He has been raised; he is no longer here."**

**Mark also uses this same word to describe Jesus' actions in other miracle stories. Jesus commands the paralyzed man whose sins he forgives before he heals his paralysis, "Arise, take up your cot and walk." He commands Jairus's daughter, whose family perceives her to be dead, "Arise". Jesus takes an epileptic boy by the hand and raises him up, just as he does Peter's mother-in-law.**

**Mark repeats the word and gesture of raising people up to connect Jesus' resurrection with his healings. This story we hear this morning sets Jesus on the path of being a healer. And what is interesting is that Jesus enters into a normal family situation. Peter has a mother-in-law. The first pope was married! So much for clerical celibacy. Maybe this is why Peter's mother-in-law is given such little attention in the church. And maybe she was not too happy that Peter was running around with the rabble. Remember that this story is right after Peter starts hanging around with Jesus. She wanted a stable life for her daughter after all. Who are these guys anyway? Perhaps, later in life, Peter's mother-in-law will**

resemble the remark once made by Hubert Humphrey, "Behind every successful man, one finds a surprised mother-in-law."

Whatever the woman's reservations may have been, she does respond to Jesus. She is raised up and she does what she does best. She serves. But, then, Jesus had served her, had healed her. So there is reciprocity in this gospel story. It does not say in the text but I imagine that she served willingly. She does what she knows how to do so that she can show her gratitude.

In the text the word *diakonie* is translated as "began to wait on." The word means *serve*. The word *deacon* comes from this same word. The word can mean that one provides for physical needs and serving the table. I think that another appropriate translation would be the word *ministered* to Jesus. It is interesting that the same Greek word is translated differently depending on the circumstances. For example, in some translations earlier in Mark's Gospel, the translation is "the angels ministered to him." However, when the same word is used with reference to women, it is translated "to serve." This downplays the mother-in-law's action. In the original gospel of Mark, using the same word for the action of angels and the action of the healed woman, obviously equated their level of service to Jesus. What the angels were able to do for Jesus in the wilderness, the woman whose fever has fled now does for Jesus within her home. The home becomes sanctified. And what is even better is that after the Sabbath is over, the door of her home becomes a place where those who seek healing will enter. In fact, the whole city was gathered around the door. In Mark's gospel Jesus later gives the word *serve* an additional meaning when he equates serving with giving one's life. Perhaps Peter's mother-in-law is one of the anonymous women disciples who stay with Jesus at the foot of his cross. They served Jesus to the end.

So here is a question that comes from this text that all of us can consider: What does Peter's mother-in-law exemplify for you? There are certainly both men and women who serve within this church. I suppose that the way that we serve is the most important thing. It needs to be chosen, not imposed upon us. I remember that the woman who preached at my ordination to the diaconate looked over the crowd of us who were to be ordained and she said, "Hmmm, I see that those of you who are to be ordained today are mostly women and some of you are black women. Well, you folks need to be new kinds of deacons. You need to serve, yes. But it is service with joy and dignity. Service is never imposed."

I was trying to think of an example from my own life where I experienced this type of service. And I came up with an example from my graduation from the

University of Notre Dame. Just before my graduation, I received a hand painted card from one of my professors. It invited me to dinner at a fellow professor's home. All the students in my department received the same invitation. And when I arrived at the home there was a long table and it was covered with a lace table cloth; there were flowers and lighted candles. And to my surprise each graduate had a hand painted name tag stating where they should be seated. But there were no name tags for the professors. One of them came into the room and asked us to sit down. And then the professors who had taught us in our graduate program came in dressed in an apron and they served us food that had taken them all afternoon to prepare. Only after we had eaten did they come in and join us for coffee. What a way to send us off. What a reminder that a graduate degree did not mean lording over but rather meant that we were now equipped to serve.

What about us? True servant leadership can enrich a congregation. Will Campbell, the Baptist preacher and writer has said, it is not important to be the church, but aggressively and simply "to church." That is the meaning of freely chosen service. And as we come to church we greet one another, sit down, and get ready for a shared Eucharistic meal.

I saw the archeological site at Capernaum in Galilee, I saw what they identified as the site of the house of Peter's mother-in-law. Just above this site, they built a church and in the building there is a glass floor through which you can see the rooms of what might have been her home. On the glass floor right above the house is a Communion table. In Mark's Gospel, this would make sense because when we serve one another in Communion we resemble Peter's mother-in-law. We feed one another. We continue feeding one another as we gather at coffee hour. And we heal one another with our stories and our attention. We are deacons to one another. And as we hear the last words of the service we are told that we should go forth in the name of Christ. Alleluia. There is a world outside that is hungry and needs to be feed. There is a world out there that needs to be healed. Notice now what happens in Capernaum. If we are on the right track, we had better open the doors because the world will be coming to be fed and to be healed. And our response should be, " Alleluia"