

It's two for one day here at St. Paul's. One Gospel lesson, two unrelated mini sermons. I had two things to talk about, and couldn't land on either one, so I decided to do both.

Mini sermon #1. It comes from the first part of our Gospel lesson.

It's a story likely to make 21st century American women gnash their teeth, or at least grind them angrily. Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law. And then she gets up and serves him.

How self-serving is that? The man needs food for himself and his friends. The woman of the house is sick. So the man heals her, so she can take care of the guys. To our 21st century ears this makes Jesus sound like a male chauvinist pig.

Ah. But there's much more going on here. And we need to take off our 21st century lenses to see it.

So I'll mention my maternal grandmother. Grandma loved being the host for her family. She loved cooking. When I was older, she did help teach me how to cook. But before that point, I was always to stay out of her kitchen when she was cooking. I could sit in the breakfast nook and talk to her. But her kitchen was hers.

Grandma loved to spoil her grandkids. She loved to host the big family meals. When she got older, one of the hardest things for her to give up was cooking. She gave up driving long before she gave up cooking.

Grandma would be mortified if anyone in her house suggested that she sit down and let them do the cooking. She would be mortified if any visitors were in her house, and she was unable to take care of them.

And she was an old-school twentieth-century woman.

Rewind 2,000 to Peter's mother-in-law. A 1st century Jewish matriarch would be like my old-school grandmother on steroids. Serving guests would not just be something she would do because she liked to do it. Her entire sense of honor would also be tied up in it. She would feel like she was being dishonorable by not taking care of the needs of her guests. Lying around sick while there were guests in the house would cause her great angst.

So when Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, her behavior after the healing would be completely natural in her culture. The minute she was healed she would want nothing more than to get to work taking care of her guests.

Having said that, there is one additional spiritual nugget in here as well.

Our text says that when Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law of the fever, he "took her by the hand and lifted her up." But the language is very strong. It could be translated he "brought her under his power and raised her or roused her or awakened her." Jesus does

something powerful for her. It's not 'take two aspirin and call me in the morning.' It is a powerful intervention in her life.

And then, Mark says, "She began to serve them." Serve is the verb *diakoneo*, the same root for the ministry of deacons. And the tense is the "present continuous." She begins to serve, she begins to "deacon," and she keeps on doing it.

Ok. There is a plain sense that she feels better and returns to her main job. But there's a deeper sense that she has been brought under Jesus' power, she has been raised up, she begins a new ministry of service. She has been given new life, or a new lease on life, and begins, perhaps, a lifetime of service, a lifetime of "deacon-ing."

I believe that's an important spiritual message. Jesus serves us by bringing healing, by bringing new life. And it's a natural response to then begin a ministry of service ourselves. To love others as we have been loved. To serve others as we have been served. Jesus gives us his power. Jesus empowers us. And an appropriate response is to use that power in the service of others.

This is not about Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law so that she could wait on Jesus hand and foot. This is a model for the Christian life. We are called to love and serve others in the same way that Christ loved and served us.

In fact, Peter's mother-in-law is the first to embody a key theme of discipleship in Mark. She serves.

Later in Mark Jesus will on numerous occasions stress the importance of service, the importance of "deacon-ing" to his disciples. Jesus will say things like:

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."¹

Or "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant."²

Or "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."³

Service is important in Mark and in the other Gospels. Service is ideal discipleship. And since Mark is the earliest Gospel, and Peter's mother-in-law is the first one whose service is mentioned, hers is not a position of servility. No, she is the first to serve by deacon-ing. She is a servant *par excellence*. It is a position of honor, a position to be emulated.

That's mini-sermon #1.

Mini sermon #2 comes the next morning.

¹ Mk 9:35

² Mk 10:43

³ Mk 10:45

Jesus spends that night healing many who have been brought to him for healing. The whole village crowds in around the door of Peter's house.

But then we're told, "In the morning, while it was still very dark, (Jesus) got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."

This is one of the wonderful mysteries of the Gospel. We believe that Jesus is somehow God incarnate, God in flesh. And yet God the Son over and over again seeks out time to commune in prayer with God the Father. Prayer is a priority for Jesus.

Over and over again Jesus finds time to pray. Even on the night before his death Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. In the city of Jerusalem at Passover time, a city of 100,000 with perhaps 250,000 additional visitors would cram into an area of less than a square mile. Yet Jesus still finds a private time and a place that night where he can pray. It's a huge priority for him, from the beginning of his ministry until the end.

What about us? What about his followers?

It's February. We've passed the season of making New Year's resolutions. It's not quite Lent, a time when we are supposed to find ways to spend more time with God. So this sermon is a tad out of season.

But the need to pray is never out of season. If Jesus shared a unique union the Father and yet made it a priority to spend time in prayer, how much more does it need to be a priority for us?

I know, we all lead busy lives. But the busier our lives, the more things we're engaged in, the greater the need becomes for prayer.

See if you can carve out the space. Get up a few minutes earlier while it may be quiet in the house. Or stay up a few minutes later. Find a quiet spot in the middle of the day—duck into a bathroom stall if you have to. Maybe leave your headphones in, but turn your music off, or change to music that assists you in praying.

And don't just talk to God. That's important. Praising God. Asking things of God. That's all good. But also seek time when you're not talking, but listening. Not active asking, but simply basking in God's presence. If you're into more formal forms of prayer like the daily office, add a couple minutes of silence in the middle or at the end. And if you have a good rhythm of prayer, you might even look at extending the time a little—7 minutes instead of 5, 15 minutes instead of 10, 30 minutes instead of 20.

Find that time. Carve out that space. Jesus made it a priority in his life. We his followers need to do the same.