

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B

February 4, 2018

Ps. 147:1-12, 21C • Isaiah 40:21-31 • 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 • Mark 1:29-39

Kingdom Living

We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of God, full of grace and truth. Amen.

One story. Three scenes.

A cast of characters and various settings and the theme is the same.

It's the same as last week.

Jesus intervenes in the cosmic conflict between the power of evil and the power of God by doing deeds of power and preaching.

These deeds of power take place in various locations

moving from the privacy of a home to a public sphere.

Jesus also moves from the solitude of the wilderness into and throughout Galilee preaching the good news of the Kingdom.

There is a lot of movement in this story.

It begins in the private home of an unnamed widow,

the mother-in-law of Simon, who is a disciple of Jesus.

She is very sick with a fever,

which as we all know was often a death sentence before the discovery of penicillin.

When a fever took hold in those days, there wasn't much to do except wait, wait for either the fever to break or the person to die.

Those were the predictable outcomes.

But not this time.

Jesus comes to the house and here is where we must pay attention to what happens next.

You see, in Mark's gospel the details in healing stories are particularly important and they connect to one another throughout the gospel making a larger point.

It's important to note who is being healed. Where they are being healed.

What is the ailment? What are the symptoms and how does the healing take place?

And what do the specifics point to symbolically in the larger picture?

Well, here we know the house belongs to a family member of a disciple.

In a gospel in which Jesus is often portrayed as anti-family, here is an example of his support of family.

The parent-child bond is strong, especially in this story of the healing of a mother and a widow.

This would have meant a lot in a culture to whom honor thy father and thy mother was sacred.

Now, for the healing itself. Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up.

He touches her.

Remember, in that time touching the sick was to be avoided.

Also, this is all taking place on the Sabbath.

Touching the sick or dying would have made Jesus unclean,

not to mention the cultural taboos surrounding men touching women at that time.

This makes it all the more powerful that Jesus touches her.

Jesus does touch two others in healing stories in this gospel.

He touches Jairus' daughter, a young woman whose name we do not know.

And again, he touches a young boy with epilepsy in chapter nine.

But the word I want to focus on for a moment is the word translated as "lifted up."

"He took her by the hand and lifted her up."

The Greek word used here, for the classicists among us, is: *ἐγείρω/egeirō*.

This same verb is used in several healing stories throughout this gospel,

notably in those other stories in which Jesus touches those who are sick and dying

(1:31, 2:9, 2:11, 3:3, 5:41, and 9:27).

This word in the Greek appears often,

translated as lifted up, raised up, and risen.

It is this same word which is used to describe Jesus' resurrection.

This story today is the first resurrection story in the gospel as Simon's mother-in-law,

a woman whose name we do not know is raised up by Jesus.

And what happens after she is healed?

After she is risen?

She gets up and begins to serve them.

Go ahead, react to that however you feel is appropriate.

Roll your eyes, sigh, shrug your shoulders in exasperation and acceptance.

Did we get that out of our system enough to talk about it? Good.

I agree. At first glance, this sentence is cringe worthy.

This poor woman is brought back from the brink of death

to serve tea and cookies to her guests.

But it's more than that I promise.

New Testament scholar, Cynthia Kittredge sheds light on this passage saying:

"Just as the demons do in the previous scene, the fever "leaves her."

Having been "raised," she "serves" them.

On the most literal level it may mean that she gets up and prepares and serves food.

But the verb "**to serve**" is another key term in Mark's gospel.

Its presence here shows that her service is to be interpreted

as a paradigmatic response of faith.

Meaning both to serve at a table and to do ministry,

the verb **diakonein** is used of the angels in the wilderness who "serve" (Mark 1:14)

and of the women who followed Jesus and served him (Mark 15:41)

Serving epitomizes Jesus' 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).

Simon's mother-in-law is an icon of resurrection and a paradigm of Christian ministry."

(Commentary from Working Preacher website, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge)

This unnamed woman is an icon of resurrection and a paradigm of Christian ministry.

I love that. It certainly reframes her story of healing and serving.

We don't know the rest of her story.
We don't know what she does when her son-in-law leaves to follow Jesus.
The rest of her ministry, her life and witness, is unknown to us.
But I imagine it to be powerful.
For she was sick and near death and she was raised,
raised from the death by Christ himself.

From here, Jesus and the disciples leave to go out and heal others.

The cosmic conflict between good and evil continues as Jesus casts out unclean spirits,
heals others, and restores them to community.

In the second scene of today's story, the whole city was gathered around the door.

Jesus' fame was spreading, news of his ability to heal,
and this Kingdom of which he taught, God's Kingdom.

God's Kingdom is a place where **love wins** over evil, demons are cast out, the dead are raised,
the unclean made clean, and all people restored to community.

The third and final scene in our story today is Jesus retreating to the wilderness.

He goes to a deserted place to pray.

After a time, it says Simon and his companions hunted for him and found him.

They were *hunting* for him.

Without tending his own soul, Jesus could not continue this Kingdom work.

Off in the wilderness talking to God, it must have become clear what he must do next.

For he tells the disciples when they find him,

"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."

Jesus makes this decision in prayer,

to go forth throughout Galilee preaching the good news of God's Kingdom.

That is where our story is headed.

On the heels of these first deeds of power,

in tiny villages north of Jerusalem not too far from where Jesus grew up,
his ministry takes off.

And still, we must keep in mind, these early healings and what they mean.

Healing in Mark's gospel is never of the individual,

just as we aren't called to be disciples as individuals.

We are called two by two into community.

And, Jesus heals, restoring people to health and wholeness

in order that they may be restored to relationship.

In the Kingdom of God relationship is primary.

Jesus brings people into God's Kingdom, bringing them back to community, back to God.

As Kittridge writes,

“To be released from illness and restored to oneself
means one can fulfill responsibilities to others.

Repair of the bonds of family is a dimension of resurrection.” (Kittredge)

As our opening collect, our opening prayer said,

*“Set us free, O God, from the restrictions of sin,
and give us the freedom of the abundant life
which may be found in God’s Kingdom.”*

May we seek restoration of relationships

and understand it to be yet another dimension of resurrection,
another facet of striving to live in God’s Kingdom.