

## **FIFTH SUNDAY AFTR EPIPHANY**

February 8, 2009

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

### *And She Served*

I once heard the speaker say at the beginning of a lecture, “I am going to tell you what I will say. I will then say what I am going to say and finally I will conclude by telling you what I said.” That made me eager to hear the talk. The passage from Mark has challenged my imagination enough to make me want to tell you what I’m going to say so that none of us gets confused when I deviate from where everyone including myself thought we were going. We are going to touch on the Mark passage from last week, reflect on this week’s passage in light of what those miracles meant to Jesus and his followers and what they say to us today. At the end, it may just all come together.

Sometimes we surprise ourselves at the things we can do. I had just turned 40 when I began Seminary. I had three children in school, a part time position that financed my studies and a bundle of fears about how to pull it all off. Four years later, with my husband and children surprisingly still talking to me, I was presented with a diploma, announcing to the world that I had earned a Master’s of Divinity Degree. I had to check out that diploma just to make sure that someone actually signed it. From somewhere within my being, I found the strength and the grace to trust and to do. I would guess that everyone has had one or more of those amazing moments. You are just not sure that you can pass the exam, get the job, hang the drapes, learn to drive, master the intricacies of the cell phone or make a batch of cookies without burning them. You surprise yourself by your success and are emboldened to try new experiences.

With that in mind; picture, if you will, the scene of today's Gospel passage. Jesus and his friends left the Synagogue while people were still in awe about what they had just seen. The Carpenter from Nazareth, the friend of some local fishermen had begun to attend the synagogue, teaching with clarity and authority. Jesus was becoming known for his compassionate interpretation of scripture. One morning he put his compassion into action, freeing a man from the grip of an unclean spirit. Through Mark's spare style we learn that this was the first of Jesus' miraculous events.

I beg you not for a minute to forget that Jesus was a human being. What then did it feel like to him to have the sudden welling up of such power that he could command a demon to leave a person? Was he shocked or surprised at the intensity of his ability? Did he sense that this power had always been within, waiting to be called upon? Did he ask himself, "Where did that come from," or did he know in his heart that the power had always been within, waiting for him to be ready to use it.

And what about his four disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John? They were from two fishing families of the town. Were they content to spend their lives earning a living on the lake or did they yearn for something else, wondering if they could succeed? Perhaps, they had been to hear John the Baptist and knew Jesus from that experience. Maybe they were impressed with the words of Jesus at the Capernaum synagogue. Whatever it was that caught their attention, they did not hesitate to respond to the invitation Jesus made to each of them. The first place that they followed him was into the synagogue wanting to hear more of what Jesus had to say. And the miracle took place. Did they begin to congratulate themselves for deciding to follow Jesus? Wouldn't you?

The people who saw the healing were amazed. They had been captivated by his words and were convinced of his greatness by the healing. They wanted to talk to him, bring family members for healing and wait for the next surprise. It was obvious that Jesus and his friends needed some privacy to absorb the meaning of the miracle for their own lives. Peter said, “Come to my house. It’s close, just up the road. We can get some food and we can talk.”

Some of us have been to the remains of Capernaum. We have seen what might be the site of the synagogue. We have seen the place that is traditionally known as the site of Peter’s house. We have also seen the quiet beauty of the ancient town that was built at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. If those two sites are authentic, it was a brief walk from the synagogue over to Peter’s home. The journey from Capernaum into Church began with that walk.

This is where my 21<sup>st</sup> Century feminist sensitivity clashes with Mark’s presentation of a profound theological statement. I concede to the theology but not without a struggle.

Mark’s writing style is simple and direct. Some of us remember the old *Dragnet* Television Series and Sergeant Joe Friday’s memorable words: “Just the facts, Ma’am.” Mark would have liked *Dragnet*. He describes the group coming into the house and immediately telling Jesus about Peter’s mother-in-law being sick. Jesus went directly to the woman, took her hand, lifted her up and she was healed. She jumped right out of bed, set the table and served the meal. We don’t know her name. We don’t know Peter’s wife’s name. We don’t know anything about the family situation. Were there children running around? Was fishing profitable? Were there others in the family to take over the

fishing when Peter and Andrew went about with Jesus? All of that is extraneous information for Mark. He wants to tell us that Jesus had the power to heal as well as to exorcise demons. It does not matter to Mark that in my 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding, this passage diminishes a human being making her almost robotic. What matters to Mark is that his readers appreciate both the amazing power contained within the inner being of Jesus and the meaning of that power for all his followers.

If I could speak to Mark I would tell him how important it is to me to know that woman; to understand her that I might celebrate the healing with her or be annoyed with Jesus and her family for their placid acceptance of her willingness to serve. Because I do not know her, she becomes for me a representative of all the anonymous people who intersect with our daily lives. Perhaps she is the grocery clerk who is exhausted having stayed up all night with a sick child and does not have the energy to be polite. Maybe she is the grim faced elderly man pushing a broom in a mall rather than swinging his golf clubs. His small pension and Social Security are not enough to live on in his retirement years. Or possibly she is the waitress at the restaurant who in her weariness makes a mistake on the order. In her family there is no money for college so she is working two jobs to pay tuition in order to realize her dream of becoming a teacher.

They all get up and serve us and we don't even know their stories just as we don't know hers. So, you see why I have a problem with this passage.

I read an article in Christian Century by Lawrence Wood <sup>1</sup>that gave me a somewhat different perspective. Peter's mother-in-law was sick on the Sabbath. Jesus, a male, not a blood relative came to her and touched her. Jesus risked being shunned as unclean for healing on the Sabbath and touching a woman not related to him. Mark's

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<sup>1</sup> Wood, Lawrence, Reflections on The lectionary, Christian Century, January 27, 2009.

readers of 2000 years ago knew that background and understood the profound significance of Jesus' action. They knew the risk that he took. They knew that he put people before religious laws. And they loved him for what he did. And what did Jesus think? Did he feel that power coming out from his inner being and be glad that he could help someone in pain? Did he feel confirmed in his calling through that second miracle? Was it becoming clear to him what he was called to do and where he needed to go? It's almost as though with the second miracle only a short time after the first, Jesus committed himself to taking the journey from Capernaum to the cross.

Wood also points out that by her spontaneous gift of serving her guests, Peter's mother-in-law practiced the sacred responsibility of hospitality and became the Church's first deacon. In a very real sense, the Church was born in Peter's house as a humble woman prepared the table, brought in the food, said the Sabbath prayer over the candles and cared for the needs of family and guests.

If I ask myself if I think she wanted to serve, I am asking the wrong question. When I ask myself how she felt as she served, I know it is the correct question but I can only surmise the answer. She was the oldest woman in that home. This was her domain. Following her healing, she was where she needed to be. Had she still been sick, she would have fretted that she did not have the strength to be welcoming; that she would not have been able to fulfill her responsibilities, that her guests would not be comfortable or well fed. Still, did she ever yearn to do something different, to be someone different? We don't know. What we do know is that Peter's mother-in-law was where she needed to be when she needed to be there. The miracle of healing was a gift not an obligation. She was content.

The world has seen great and small changes in 2000 years. As we all know, the role of women, particularly in the West, has undergone significant transformation particularly in the last 60 years. There's an old bumper sticker that I still see occasionally. It proclaims: *A Woman's place is in the House and in the Senate.*

Yet there is still that core of women who continue to be the backbone of volunteer organizations. Here in this church what would we do without them? This faithful group prepares the newsletter, counts the money, works in the Poss Shop, puts on the annual Bazaar, prepares the flowers for Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter and serves at Memorial Receptions. Do they always like what they are doing? No, I don't think so. Are there days when they would prefer not coming in to Church? Are there times when they say to themselves that they are too tired to come, but still make it in? Yes and yes again.

Wood shares a conversation he had with such a woman. "She couldn't help out at the church dinner one year, having just had a hip replacement. I went to check on her a day before the dinner. 'They're not using boxed potatoes are they?' she demanded. 'The people who come expect potatoes made from scratch.' 'They're planning to peel potatoes all morning,' I said. 'And the ham? Did they get a good dry ham, or the watery kind?'" Honestly, I didn't know. It was probably the same ham as always. I asked if she had always enjoyed cooking, and to my surprise, she adamantly said no, that cooking was a big chore. "Really? I thought you enjoyed doing this." "I don't love the potatoes," she said. "Really, young man, you should know I love Christ, and there are only so many ways a body can do that."

So I come full circle. There are things that we do because we enjoy them. There are things that we do because we have a responsibility. There are things that we commit ourselves to doing because somewhere deep within each of us is that still small voice calling us to be neighbor, to be helper, to be friend. In reaching out to others, we often surprise ourselves at what we can do and at the miracles of love and healing that might just occur. In those times we are the miracle. We are church.

May we live fully and joyfully no matter what. Amen.