

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 8, 2015
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

2 Kings 4:8-37
Psalm 142
I Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

Our Gospel lesson today is a continuation of last week's Gospel text. Jesus and his followers leave the synagogue in Capernaum, where he has healed a man with an evil spirit. As they leave the synagogue, they enter Simon Peter's house where they encounter Simon's mother-in-law who is very ill with a fever.

A quick piece of context here. Remember, this is the Sabbath. What Jesus has just done in the synagogue (healing this man) was a "no no." It was a breach, a violation, of Sabbath observance. But now, he enters this home, and he commits a *very big* "no no." He walks up to a female who is ritually unclean because she is ill, and he *touches her*. On the Sabbath. A complete and utter violation of proper religious protocol and practice.

Jesus does not seem to care one little bit. Remember last week how I said that Jesus will challenge your most deeply cherished assumptions and practices? Surprise – I was not kidding.

Back to the text. Jesus takes the woman by the hand and helps her up, and her fever immediately disappears. Then people from all over the village begin to bring to him persons who are sick and possessed, and he heals them too.

I got to wondering this week: What did the man in the synagogue do after Jesus healed him? And what do all of these people that Jesus heals outside of Peter's house in Capernaum do after they are healed?

We are not told. I suspect that some were so grateful to be made well, to be freed from such debilitating and destructive things, that they returned quickly to their old lives and routines and relationships.

And no doubt, it is indeed a wonderful thing to be freed *from* things that bind us. I have been a preacher for more than 30 years, and in that time I have attempted to name the freedom *from* the many things that bind us and hurt us. I have proclaimed freedom *from sin*, of course.

But I have also spoken about freedom *from* the various manifestations of sin that often plague us: fear, despair, loss, insecurity, selfishness, and a hundred other things that harm us. In my bolder moments, I have transcended talking about items of a personal nature and proclaimed God's promise to free people from hunger and discrimination and other forms of oppression.

All of this is well and good. But I wonder if I have been guilty of preaching an *incomplete* Gospel. I wonder about this when I think of this man in the synagogue and all of these people in Capernaum who are touched and healed by Jesus. What happened next for them? What did life look like for them?

We do not know.

But there is one person in this scenario that is touched by Jesus about whom we do know a bit more. That person is Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus touches her. Jesus frees her *from* illness, just as he has freed the crowds from disease and possession.

We don't know what happens to the others. But we do know a bit about Peter's mother-in-law. And what I see with Peter's mother-in-law is that Jesus not only frees her *from* something that seeks to oppress her; he also frees her *for* something. He frees her *for* a life of purpose, meaning, generosity, and service.

And when I say that Jesus frees this woman *for* a life of service, I'm talking about more than the gender stereotypes that have been harmful and injurious to women. The text tells us that after Jesus heals this woman, she "serves" the men by preparing a meal for them.

The term for "serve" here is the Greek term *diakeneo*, from which we get our English word "Deacon." Its primary meaning in the New Testament involves serving food and waiting tables. That's what Peter's mother-in-law does here.

But before we get all angry and wonder why Peter couldn't get off of his behind and make some sandwiches here, we need to take a breath. Before we denounce Christianity as being a patriarchal system that oppresses women, we need to take a *deep* breath. And rather than criticize a two thousand year old text

because it is not as “enlightened” as we are, perhaps we should shift our focus from the text and look to Jesus. What is he up to in this situation?

If you push beyond the immediacy of this text and go further toward the end of Mark’s Gospel, you discover something interesting. If you go to Mark 15:40-41, you see Jesus hanging on a Cross. At that moment, Mark finally divulges a little secret. Mark shows us that the crowd of Jesus’ regular disciples *includes more than twelve men*. Mark shows us a group of women watching Jesus’ execution, while the rest of his followers have fled after his arrest (14:50). The last we saw of Peter he was standing and weeping in a courtyard (14:72).

Mark does not name all of these women, and we don’t know much about them. But we do learn that they “provided for Jesus while he was in Galilee” (15:41). And guess what verb is used to translate “provided for?” It’s the word *diakeneo*.

I believe that Peter’s mother-in-law is one of the “serving” women who witness the crucifixion. And if she is among those women, then she is more than a cook, waiter, and dishwasher. She is also a *follower*. And if she is a follower who is willing to serve as she goes, then she is also a *disciple*.

Peter’s mother-in-law provides me a possible answer to my prior question: What happened to the man in the synagogue, and to all the others that Jesus

touched and healed? Were they merely saved *from* all the stuff that held them back, so that they could just return to their lives and families?

Or was there more? Peter's mother-in-law was not just saved *from* something. She was saved *for something*. She was delivered *from* her illness in order that she might be restored to community, and embrace the life God meant for her to live.

And so it is with us. The Christian life is not just about what we are saved *from*, brothers and sisters. The Christian life is about what we are saved *for*. Jesus does not merely save us from sin and hell and death. He saves us *for* a life of service, generosity, compassion, and love. He saves us not so that we can merely get up and go on our way; he saves us so that we might follow in *His* way. He saves us not merely *from* sin and death and hell, but *for* community, relationship, and service to one another and the world.

As we come to the Table this morning, come with faith. And see in the bread and wine His grace to save you *for* something, not merely *from* something. Receive the grace he offers you. Then let him use you this week to be of service to others.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

