

February 4, 2018
"The Healing of Simon's Mother-in-law"
Psalm 147:1-11 Mark 1:29-39
Rev. Karin Kilpatric

Here in Mark's Gospel, we meet the mother-in-law of Simon. Simon was one of the men who, only a few verses earlier, had walked away from his fishing boat, to become one of Jesus' disciples. The healing of Simon's mother-in-law is the first healing miracle in the book of Mark.

When writing a sermon on Jesus' healing ministry, I used to approach this task with ambivalence. I felt I was being forced to walk some tenuous line between the rational thinking of a modern human being schooled in the fundamentals of anatomy and germ theory and my religious belief in the power of God, through Christ, to heal the physical body even seemingly outside the laws of nature. The very fact that the Gospels are chock full of these miracles of healing is a testament to their importance in understanding the whole ministry of Jesus. More and more, as I grow older, I resonate with their truth. It is clear to me that these stories of healings convey more than the supernatural power of a miracle worker sent from God to hand out favors to worthy humans.

Let's return to the story for another look. Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed with a fever. Jesus went to her, took her hand, and helped her up. The fever left her body and she served them. The story follows the classic form of a healing story used in myth and legend--the description of an illness (here, a fever), followed by the request for healing (Jesus is told of the mother-in-law's sickness), then the healing itself (he took her hand and helped her up), and finally, the demonstration of the cure (the fever left her and she served them). Then, here, at the conclusion of the story, we find a statement, which takes us beyond the

classic model of miracle healing. “Then she began serving them.” This statement, which is easily overlooked, might be a subtle guide to a much greater understanding of the story. It seems that “She began serving them” is more than the attempt to prove that Simon’s mother-in-law really was healed. See, she could pop up and wait on those gathered. Some translations make it even more specific, saying that she got up and prepared them a meal. The verb, “to serve,” is at the heart of the Christian message. In the original Greek the verb used here is *diakoneo*, the same verb Jesus uses to describe the essence of his own ministry later in Mark’s Gospel. You might recognize the connection of *diakoneo* to the word and work of deacons in Christian Churches.

As Christians, we are called to lives of service. Serving others is not a submissive act of a powerless person who is somehow less worthy than those upon whom they bestow their service. Service is the manifestation of an empowering love—a love, which has so radically changed one from the inside out that they can now hear this clear calling for their lives. One who adopts a life of service is one who “really gets it”—who understands what Jesus’ life and message is all about. The understanding begins bodily and moves through heart knowledge to perceptual understanding.

The story of the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law, like the story of the fisherman leaving their nets, is a call to discipleship. This woman’s healing is her call. Healing from mental illness was the origin of Mary Magdalene’s call. Healing was the origin of the call of Joanna and Suzanna as well. Luke 8:1-13 reads, “Sometime later, Jesus traveled through towns and villages preaching the good news about the kingdom of God. The twelve disciples went with him and so did some women who had been healed of evil spirits and diseases.” He then mentions Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Suzanna, by name.

Healing is a centerpiece of Jesus' earthly ministry. We are all aware of and most of us have experienced the undeniable connection between the physical body and the human spirit and soul. We recognize the power of prayer and the power of love and hope to heal and the power of despair, betrayal, and stress, to lead to illness and disease. If one doubts the mind/body connection they have only to consider how sad thoughts and compassionate feelings can make salty water, in the form of tear drops, slip out of the duct in the corner of one's eye. The sense of fear or surprise can actually make one stop breathing for a few seconds and can make the heart race. One would have to have an almost belligerent cynicism not to allow the truth of the connection of body, mind and spirit to enter their awareness.

Medicine has taught us so much about the science of the body and how it functions and this knowledge has become a foundation for healing, guiding the work of doctors, nurses, dentists, and therapists. But for all modern medicine has taught us, we still know, and so do good doctors, that, finally, there is a deep mystery at the center of all healing. Most of you know that my father was a family physician, a man who served his community and knew his patients, their families and their histories. We lived 30 miles from the nearest hospital so people came to our front door for help in their times of crisis. Our lives were filled with intimate details of human illness and death and also of examples of the amazing power of the body to heal. When my father passed away, I was charged by the family to come up with a statement to put on his tombstone that would be a tribute to his life as a healer. I finally arrived at this, "He healed with the wisdom of nature and the power of love."

Even as we acknowledge the only partially knowable mystery at the heart of healing and the connection between mind/soul/spirit and the material body, we must be wary of taking a next step in assuming that those who live long healthy

lives somehow have it right and those who don't, have it wrong. We see many scoundrels who live long lives and many people of great integrity and worth who succumb to fatal accidents or brutal murder--who are faced with painful and early deaths. Robust physical health is not a reward of faithful living. Neither is illness the punishment for sin.

As healing is such a significant part of Jesus' ministry it warrants our attention and exploration. Is there a commonality at the heart of all Jesus' acts of healing, and to some extent present in all acts of healing, even the healing we bring to each other? Consider this possibility. The act of simply beholding another person has within it the power to bring healing. We encounter this word, "behold," many times in the Bible and in the sacred writings of other religions. It is a word, which seems so formal and outdated and which we would feel rather silly using ourselves. Nevertheless, it is a word whose original meaning must be remembered and saved. Jesus saw the people who stood before him—the people who made up the crowds that gathered around him. He beheld them. That is why they kept coming. He saw their flaws, their fears, their regrets, their needs, their failings, but he also saw their hidden strengths, their deep yearnings, their capacity to love, their essence and their worth. He saw them and they felt seen—not just *loved* but *known*. When someone really sees you, you feel more real to yourself. I have spoken of this quality of seeing at length in recent sermons. The graceful act of seeing another is a special kind of blessing.

In a book entitled, *The Blessing*, authors Smalley and Trent, outlined five aspects of blessing in Hebrew culture which can easily and lovingly be used in parental blessings of children today.

1. meaningful touch
2. spoken blessing
3. attachment of high value to another

4. Picturing for the other a special future
5. active commitment to the other to help realize that future.

Let's consider these aspects of blessing as we look at Jesus' healing ministry. Meaningful touch, spoken blessing, valuing the other, imagining his/her future and committing himself to that future. The feverish Mother-in-law got up and made a meal, the blind man whose eyes, touched with spittle, now could see, the lame man lying by the pool of Bethesda picked up his mat and walked on, the hemorrhaging woman's many years of bleeding stopped with the faithful touch of Christ's garment, the inhabiting spirit of the demon possessed man was sent into a herd of pigs who plunged over a cliff, a leper's skin and thus his humanity was renewed, the deaf and mute could suddenly hear and speak, the broken hearted woman now reached out in love. In all these healings, Jesus came into in people's presence, with touch and spoken blessing. He made each one feel their worth and believe in a future freed to live in a supportive community. Each recognized him or herself as a unique child of God; touched, spoken with, valued, imagined and claimed. Whether or not the pain or disability left their bodies forever, whether or not they lived many more years or only a day, they were healed and ready to serve with all they had in them. There was a regeneration of the spirit of the one beheld and blessed that was so palpable that even those around could see it manifest almost immediately in the physical body.

If the spirit of an individual can be healed, so too, can the spirit of a community; a family, a church, a nation. We can bring our grief, insecurity, resentment, abusiveness and anger forward in faith to be healed through prayer, confession, forgiveness, new awareness, and loving action. Isn't it odd that almost every speech by a political public figure in the U.S. ends with "And God bless the United States of America." And yet, these words often seem perfunctory to us, even phony, ringing hollow to our ears. What if the same words could be said

and heard with authenticity and humility? Not, “Aren’t we great?” “Of course, God is on our side,” “Go, fight win” or America First,” What if they could be heard as an honest and unpretentious plea to a power that we know and trust to be greater than any of us-- individuals or nations?

What if this call for God’s blessing could be heard and understood as a true reminder that there is a spiritual power, which is greater and yet more inclusive than any worldly power? What if this call could be to a divine truth superior to any partially formed and arrogantly defended human truth? What if could be a call to a recognition of a collective common good which deserves our attention and commitment more than devotion to self, or religious affiliation, or political party, or race or nation? What if we heard it and felt it as a plea to all of us to remember to behold Our God and the godliness in each other? If we could behold our nation in this way, we might be able to restore our health as a compassionate commonwealth of justice and peace, and look forward into our future and the future of the generations that follow us, with hope.

Jesus healed those around him in mind, body and spirit. We too find healing through the blessing of Christ and the blessings of our neighbors. Like Simon’s Mother-in-Law, our healing is a call to rise up and serve—to use our minds and our bodies, our talents and our energy, our compassion and our insight to make the world around us more fair and kind and holy. As followers of the way of Jesus, we are called to *diakoneo*, to lives of service.