

## E5B Mark 1:29-39

Some of you know that a few years before I came here I experienced a pretty severe health crisis which ended up requiring major surgery. I was in the middle of a call process with a new congregation when I had to be hospitalized, and though at first the chair of the call committee told me to focus on getting better and that they were in no rush, a few days later I was informed that they had decided to stop the call process. Although none of us knew it at the time, it took me much longer to recover than anyone expected, so maybe that was a good move on their part. But at the time, for me...believe it or not, I struggled more dealing with the possibility that I'd never be able to do ministry again than I did with the reality of permanent physical disability. I cried the first time I presided at communion after my recovery.

Mark's gospel tells the story of Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law of a fever, and, from the way it sounds, her immediately getting up and serving Jesus and the rest of the disciples. There is an uncharitable way of reading this story—that the only reason they ask Jesus to heal this poor woman is so she can get back to cooking their dinner; that she's barely given a moment to gather her wits before her son-in-law and all his friends are asking her to make them sandwiches. Couldn't they give her a minute to rest? Couldn't someone else in the family lend a hand? If you've ever lived with another person, you might have experienced finally getting over the flu only to find a week's worth of laundry, dirty dishes, and inquiries about what's for dinner. It's enough to make you want to crawl back into bed.

But if you have ever had life as you know it grind to a halt because of illness or injury or depression, or the debilitating grief that accompanies a death or divorce, or the devastation of a house fire or a job loss...then you know what it feels like to yearn for life to return—to regain the ability to do what had been second nature but now seems impossible. That is the kind of restoration that Mark describes here, using the same words as when Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave. Jesus “lifted her up” and with her life and ability returned, she serves.

Even with Jesus' commands in scripture in front of us, we don't always take a very high view of service. Wouldn't we rather be served than do the serving? Yet, Jesus commanded his disciples to serve one another—to wash feet, not just to be washed. Simon's mother-in-law doesn't hear this instruction, yet as soon as she's able, she uses the life that has been restored to her to serve others. In fact, she seems to understand the purpose of life after an encounter with

Jesus much better than her son-in-law and the rest of the disciples. Over the course of Jesus' ministry, the disciples will argue as to which of them is the greatest and who should get the most honorable places. They try to argue Jesus away from the cross, they try to keep children from bothering him, they want to call down fire and brimstone on the people who don't want to listen to him. And all the while, Jesus is simply serving the people around him.

After Jesus has healed and driven demons out of everyone in the town, he goes away to a deserted place to pray. This, too, is instructive: if God incarnate needed time for spiritual renewal after serving, then surely we should be following the sabbath command and taking that time away as well. But then the disciples hunt him down to let him know that everyone is looking for him. Mark doesn't specify *why* everyone is searching for him, but since the whole town had shown up the night before and he had already healed everyone who had some sort of need, we have to wonder what they wanted. At other times in Jesus' ministry the people respond to his miraculous signs by trying to make him their king; maybe the disciples want Jesus to go back to Capernaum so the people there can treat him like some kind of celebrity—and maybe treat them like the celebrity's inner circle.

But Jesus has other plans: *Let's go to the other towns so I can proclaim the message there, too, because that's what I came to do.* The disciples might be confused about the purpose of Jesus' mission, but he is quite clear: he goes to the synagogues to preach the good news, and he drives out demons. He's not there to sign autographs, take selfies, or receive the accolades of the townspeople; instead, he's there to help. It's remarkable that the disciples watch him do this time and again and still expect that one day they will end up lounging around his court while he sits on throne like any other ruler. Jesus always shows them a different kind of kingdom, one where the king himself is servant of all.

We don't know whether Simon's mother-in-law already knew Jesus or this was their first interaction. And we don't know how debilitating her illness was, although with 2000 fewer years of medical advances, that fever could have been deadly. We only know that in response to Jesus doing what was life-giving for her, she does what is life-giving for those around her. When illness, loss, or catastrophe knocks us down, we are promised that God is present with us. When we are lifted up again, we have the opportunity to make God present for others. May God not just restore our strength for service, but revive our hearts for service.