February 8, 2015 – 5th Sunday after Epiphany

© 2015 Jean E. Mornard

*He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

This little interlude with Simon’s mother-in-law seems a little strange and out of place, coming as it does in the midst of a flurry of preaching and casting out demons. If you recall, last week’s Gospel reading saw Jesus’ first exorcism, along with his preaching with authority in the synagogue. And at the end of this passage, he’s back at it:

*And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

But in the middle, we have this little homey healing of a relative of one of his brand new disciples. As I said, it seems a little out of place, but it’s this very oddness that gives this story its authenticity. I can just imagine Peter, or Simon as he’s still known, saying, after a long day of preaching and demon casting, “Hey, Jesus, my house isn’t far from here, and my mother-in-law is a great cook. What’s say we stay there for the night and kick it again first thing in the morning?”

But when they get there, the mother-in-law who, along with Peter’s wife, isn’t named, isn’t getting dinner ready. She’s in bed with a fever, which is brought immediately to Jesus’ attention.

Fevers in Jesus’ time were not good things. First of all, from a medical standpoint, a fever could be life-threatening, depending on what caused it. We take our 21st century medicine so much for granted. Before the advent of antibiotics, a fever sufferer pretty much had to just ride it out.

But also, fevers were considered to be caused by demons. Luke’s version spells it out a little more clearly when he says:

*And [Jesus] stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her.*

When we think of the fever in those terms, it makes a little more sense to include this story in with the rest of the demon stories in Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. But there’s something else strange about this passage, which I want to focus on for a bit.

*Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

One of my favorite all time movies is *Moonstruck*. In it, the main character, Loretta, has gotten engaged to her long time sort-of boyfriend, Johnny. But before they can get married, Johnny has to go back to Sicily to be with his mother on her deathbed and to break the news to her. Johnny’s a bit of a mama’s boy and Loretta is afraid he won’t tell his mother about the engagement so she makes him promise that he will. When he finally tells his mother, a miracle happens! She completely recovers, gets up, and begins to cook for all the mourners in the house. Johnny quickly flies back to New York to tell Loretta that he can’t marry her because it would kill his mother, and much hilarity ensues.

Well, that’s a silly illustration, but you can see why this passage reminds me of it, and vice versa. I guess anything in popular culture that reminds us of the Bible is a good thing, right?

But back to Mark and Peter’s mother-in-law. This is one of those passages that has irritated a bunch of people – mainly feminists – over the years. The commentaries dance delicately around the subject, so let’s bypass them and jump right into the middle, bearing in mind that I’m a feminist, too. Here are the complaints:

“Jesus raises this woman practically from death’s door so she can WAIT on him – on all of them? Couldn’t they give her a chance to regain her strength?”

“Of course, since she’s a woman, she wouldn’t have an important role in Jesus’ ministry, because women were repressed in those days.”

Or my favorite: “The Bible is written by a bunch of men! Bah!”

Well it’s true that women’s lives were very restrictive in Jesus’ time, and that gender roles were probably pretty well established along what we might think of as sexist lines today. But throughout the Gospels, that isn’t how Jesus saw women. He traveled with them, talked to them, taught them, and trusted them as followers. So I think there’s something more going on here than merely another example of women’s rights being kept from them.

The word used for “serve” in this passage is *diakoneo*. It’s the word from which we get our word “deacon.” It’s also the word that Jesus uses to describe himself in Matthew 20:28:

*“…just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*

So in a very real way, this woman was our first deacon. The first thing she did, upon being healed by Jesus, was to serve him. That makes it seem a lot less like a chauvinist slight and a lot more like a description of discipleship.

But this wasn’t a quid pro quo situation. She didn’t necessarily serve Jesus out of gratitude for his healing her, although I’m sure she was thankful. Rather, she served him because it was who she was – a servant of God, and to serve Jesus was to serve God.

This unnamed mother-in-law sets the example for all of us to follow. First of all, we need to accept God’s healing in our lives, both physically, but especially spiritually. Physical healing is a tricky subject. I truly believe in God’s ability to heal us physically, but I have also seen too many cases where someone was prayed for healing and still didn’t get well. I don’t pretend to understand this, but I’m not prepared to blame either God for being capricious or the person for not being faithful enough. As I said, I don’t understand it.

But I do understand spiritual healing and I am convinced that this is something we all should seek and accept when it’s offered. Then, when we are healed, or on the road to being healed, we can begin to look for opportunities to serve God and God’s people in ways that fit with our gifts and strengths. That might be cooking, or casting out demons, or anything in between.

This past week, I was on a retreat with several of the clergy of the Diocese, including some of the mission priests. The first night, we sat in a circle and went around introducing ourselves. I was sitting next to Mother Annie Henninger, who serves Rosebud East, and about six parishes there. When it came to my turn, I said, “Hi, I’m Jean Mornard, and I serve at Grace Church, Huron. Only Huron. Only the one parish.” That got a little laugh and I went on to say how much in awe I am of the mission priests, and all they have to do and contend with.

A little further around the circle was Mother Margaret Watson, who’s on the Cheyenne River, where, according to her blog, they’ve had nine deaths in the past week alone. After introducing herself, she went on to say that she’s in awe of the regular parish priests and she could never do what we do. I’ve heard her say that more than once, and I honestly don’t think she’s just saying it to make me feel better about myself. She recognizes that her gifts work on the reservation, and that other people have gifts that are better suited elsewhere.

There is no hierarchy in God’s service. It’s all noble because of who we serve. But sometimes it can be hard to figure out where you fit in that service – what your gifts are. This requires discernment, both individually and in community. It requires prayer and listening to what God might be saying to you.

God is reaching out his hand to heal us, and to lift us up. And he’s calling each of us to his service, in whatever way is best suited to our gifts. It’s up to us to answer that call – not out of a sense of obligation or compulsion, but because it’s who we are as people of God. And through that service, whatever it is, we will find, as it says in our Collect for Peace, our perfect freedom.

Amen.