

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd      Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: February 7, 2021 Year B 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany/Ordinary Time

Text: Mark 1:29-39

Title: An Overlooked Disciple

Focus: The un-named woman in this text, Peter's mother-in-law, is lifted up by Jesus as an unlikely example of discipleship. She's a model for the self-giving service/ministry which he himself embodies.

### **Gospel Reading: Mark 1:29-39**

<sup>29</sup>As soon as [Jesus and the disciples] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. <sup>30</sup>Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. <sup>31</sup>He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

<sup>32</sup>That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. <sup>33</sup>And the whole city was gathered around the door. <sup>34</sup>And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

<sup>35</sup>In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. <sup>36</sup>And Simon and his companions hunted for him. <sup>37</sup>When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." <sup>38</sup>He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." <sup>39</sup>And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

### **Jesus' Self-description of His Ministry**

**Do you think that you could come up with a summary sentence for Jesus' self-description of his ministry?**

In recent weeks we have talked about recurring themes of identity and how that's connected to one's call or mission and purpose. Four weeks ago, on the Sunday on which we remembered the baptism of Jesus we talked about how his identity affirmed through the divine voice from heaven was followed by his time in the wilderness and his public ministry. The voice from the heavens declared **"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."** (Mark 1:11).

The question I'm asking is sort of an extension of that link of identity with one's mission or purpose. I'd like to look at not just what we see in the story, but at what Jesus says himself about his role or purpose or ministry. How does he see himself--not just "How do others see him?" What does Jesus himself say about what characterizes his ministry?

I think today's passage provides an example of what Jesus says later in Mark is the heart of his ministry. Later in Mark, Jesus describes or defines his ministry and what it means to be a disciple or to follow him. That description connects to this passage.

## Today's Gospel Text

Today's passage takes place immediately after what we read last week in verses 21-28 in which Jesus healed the man with the unclean spirit. They had been in the temple on the Sabbath. Today's reading begins, "As soon as Jesus and the disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon [Peter] and Andrew with James and John" (v. 29).

It is the same day, still the Sabbath. This passage is a short series of 3 interconnected episodes.

- The first is a private setting, in which Jesus is told that Simon Peter's mother-in-law is sick and he heals her.
- The second shifts to a public setting. The Sabbath day has come to a close with the sunset and the people brought to Jesus all who were sick. Perhaps with a bit of hyperbole, the text says, "the whole city was gathered around the door" (v. 33).
- The third episode is the next day, when Jesus got up early and went away to a deserted place to pray.

Though these episodes are closely connected in time and place, I want to focus on the first one—in which Jesus enters Simon Peter's house and they quickly ("at once" translates the NRSV which we read) tell Jesus about her.

- Did you catch her name? No, you didn't--because it's not there; it's not mentioned.

One of the first things to be alert to is the difference between our 21<sup>st</sup> century social customs and those reflected in the text. This omission of her name is just one sign of that. She's identified by the name of her male family member (or kinsman), which would have been the proper social custom for the period. Her domain is the household of two of Jesus' new disciples, Simon Peter and Andrew.

It fits with the prevailing social custom or gender norms that they tell Jesus about her—specifically that she is sick, but then Jesus actually exceeds these boundaries when he goes to where she is, touches her in her sick or "unclean" state, and lifts her up.

Given that our own social customs would not define this as odd or unusual or taboo, we might read right over this part of the interaction. But it's a big deal that Jesus, a male outsider to the family, would go and touch her.

He touches her, takes her by the hand, raises her up, and the fever left her.

- What happens next? How does she respond?
- As translated by our NRSV text: "She began to serve them."

A woman in our Tuesday Bible study wistfully chuckled and wondered, “Did Jesus and the other men in the story just want a sandwich?”

I think she meant it as a bit of a joke, but also as a commentary on the gender expectations operative in that time and culture.

- What was meant by this verb translated *serve* in the NRSV?
- What were the expectations of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law and that of others’ around her?

**We may not be able to specifically answer that second question—about other people’s expectations, but there are clues to be identified.**

This is actually the second time this verb is used in Mark. The gospel writer Mark used the same Greek verb for her action, **diakoneó**, to describe the angels’ actions toward Jesus when he was needy and hungry in the wilderness (in Mark 1:13).

- v. 31: The Greek verb is **diakoneó** (dee-ak-on-eh'-o)
  - It’s the word from which we get *deacon*.
  - It’s generally translated *to serve* or *to minister*.

Other renderings may be agreeable, but any English translation which translates the first instance as *ministered* and the second as *served* when both are actions undertaken toward Jesus downplay the woman’s actions. The author of Mark, by using the same Greek verb to describe the action of the angels and the healed woman, equated their level of service toward Jesus.

What the angels do to care for Jesus in the wilderness is the same that this woman healed from her fever is now able to do for Jesus in her home.

### **Jesus’ Description of his Role and Being a Disciple**

A moment ago, I asked,

- “What were the expectations of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law and that of others’ around her?”

I don’t think there’s enough information in the text for us to confidently say.

Except for one other person—Jesus. Do you remember the question I posed at the beginning of the sermon?

- **“Do you think that you could come up with a summary sentence for Jesus’ self-description of his ministry?”**

I think there’s enough other information later in Mark’s gospel for us to have a sense of what Jesus thought and said about his role or his ministry and what it means to follow him that we can confidently extend that to this passage with the healed woman.

**Here's what happens later in Mark:** Disciples James and John, who are of course mentioned in today's passage, are having a bit of a squabble later in Mark's gospel. They're bickering about who is the greatest and they want Jesus to promise them that they'll have seats of honor and authority. The other disciples hear this and they get angry with James and John for the jockeying for position that they're doing. Jesus calls them all together and tries to re-orient them to how leadership and discipleship should be among them. He contrasts the way they should be with the example they see too often around them.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

And then there's the powerful verse that summarizes Jesus' view of ministry and discipleship that I think directly relates to today's passage:

- <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (NRSV).
  - That's the same verb **diakoneó** again, used twice in this verse and rendered *serve* both times.

I don't think that Jesus "just wanted a sandwich" and was pleased to have a woman go make it for him. (To be clear, I don't think that's what the person in our Bible study was suggesting.)

I think that both gospel writer Mark and, far more importantly, Jesus himself, recognized the gift of service of this woman as a full response of gratitude upon being healed. In this later passage in Mark (chapter 10), Jesus describes his own role as one who came, "not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life for others."

Being a disciple is not to be characterized by "Lording it over others," but by engaging in self-giving service. As Jesus did—and as Jesus set an example. And as this unnamed woman did.

She may be unnamed in the text, but what she did serves as an example of discipleship for us all. Thanks be to God for her act of loving service.

And thanks be to God for this good news for us as well: That God is still at work, through ordinary acts of service and sacrifice by ordinary disciples of Jesus today.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> See the whole passage at Mark 10:35-45.