

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: February 4, 2024, Year B, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Text: Mark 1:29-39

Title: Picture a Disciple

Focus: Our initial impression of the text may reinforce gender norms and expectations we find limiting. What other possibilities are present? Jesus lifted up Peter's mother-in-law, healed her, and restored her to her community, where she was able to follow him as a disciple.

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

<sup>29</sup>As soon as they 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 sundown, 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.

### **What Gender Roles Did You Learn?**

What did your mom or dad or other formative people in your life teach you about what it meant to be a boy or a girl or to grow up in your family? What was expected of you? As you grew up, what possibilities, opportunities, or horizons did you see for yourself? What barriers or obstacles did you encounter from time to time? If someone told you, "You can't do that!", how did you hear that or how did you respond?

Sometimes, we hear that kind of claim as a challenge: "If someone tells me that I can't do something, that's going to make me all the more determined to prove it that I can. Don't underestimate me."

When I was growing up, we boys in the family had both inside chores and outside chores. I learned how to do my own laundry and how to cook a meal as well as

mow the lawn and take care of other outside jobs. We would help make dinner and clean up afterwards. We didn't think it was any big deal—We saw these as important skills to be self-sufficient.

When I moved to Johnson City, Tennessee as a young man, I remember Joanne, a member in the church I served who was probably in her 60s, was so surprised that I liked to cook. I explained in a matter-of-fact way, “Well, I like to eat, so I like to cook.”

She told me she had a rental unit occupied by some male students from the university and, judging from all the fast-food wrappers in the trash, none of them knew how to cook at all.

That happened in the late 1980s when I was a young man and in a church in the American South in a culture with more pronounced gender roles, but I've encountered similar expectations in other settings, too. There was a time when I served as the pastor at a previous church here in Reno that I was planning a fellowship event with other leaders. We were planning the menu for the event and I said, “I'll bring soup.” I may have said I would bring something else, too—I don't remember exactly. We continued our planning, but one woman paused and asked me with a tone of irritation, “How does your wife feel about you volunteering her to bring all this stuff?”

“I didn't say anything about my wife. *I'm* planning on making it.”

My explanation was outside of what this woman had imagined. She figured the only way I could accomplish such a thing was to assign all the preparation to my wife. I think she was irritated with me because she figured I was dumping on my wife to do all this work—she didn't see any other way. And so, she seemed to place herself in the role of protector so that my wife wouldn't get dumped on.

## **Expectations**

I wasn't angry from this exchange, but I wasn't going to be limited or constrained by her expectations, either. I figured if something needs to be done and you enjoy doing it and are good at it, then you should have the opportunity to do it or at least decide what you want to do. In this case, I was a part of a group getting something done—hosting a meal that provided the setting for others in the church to get to know one another.

## **Gender Roles in this Story**

As I come to this story from Mark's gospel, I have this orientation that I have described--about people having the ability to choose what they want as they work

together. This brief reading has three parts to it and begins with Jesus being told “at once” about Simon Peter’s mother-in-law being sick in bed with a fever (Mark 1:30). I am suspicious and a bit uneasy that after Jesus heals her and the fever left her, she began to serve them (v. 31).

- It sounds too much like what I just described: of a person being unnecessarily limited or constrained by others’ expectations. I want her to break free from those kinds of constraints.
- Does this convey that her only purpose, having been healed, is to serve them?
  - Providing hospitality fits with gendered expectations for women, both then and now.
- Does her getting up to serve them reinforce rather than stretch or confront the operative gender roles of the day?

I don’t expect our 21<sup>st</sup> century concerns to necessarily be reflected in the societal norms of this first century setting, but I also see how Jesus himself so often defied the rigidity of rules and expectations set by religious and cultural norms of the day. As we so often point out, he ate with sinners and tax collectors, he welcomed children, he asked for water from the Samaritan woman at the well, and he healed on the Sabbath.

Is he reinforcing rigid gender roles here?

What about Jesus setting people free? Isn’t that part of his mission and how might she be free to fully be herself?

I want to ask those challenging questions and explore the text for responses.

## **Looking More Closely—Who Was this Woman and What Possibilities Existed for Her?**

While many times gospel writers tell the same stories, they each have their own storytelling or writing style. Mark is action-oriented. So many events in his stories happen “immediately” or “at once.” (In this story, the disciples told Jesus about Peter’s mother-in-law “at once” (Mark 1:30). Mark is concise in his descriptions and sparse on details. The gospel of Mark is much shorter than Matthew or Mark, whether you count number of words, verses, or chapters.

In this story, as in other places, Mark doesn’t linger to tell us why or explain much; he simply describes what happened. So, in this story we don’t have any narrative description of what a person intended, as sometimes occurs in other places or with other gospel writers.

Here’s what we might notice as we look at the story more closely:

- As we have said, Mark is action-oriented. **The verb, the action word here, is in Greek *diakoneo*** (dee-ak-on-eh'-o)

In the NRSV we read today, the phrase is translated as “she began to serve them” (v. 31). Serve can of course indicate household hospitality, but can also convey more than that. The verb *diakoneo* is the word from which we get the office of *deacon*, one whose ministry role is characterized by service.

Earlier in this chapter in Mark, when the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness, the NRSV says that angels “waited on him” (1:13), a phrase which is from the same verb *diakoneo*. Gospel writer Mark uses *diakoneo* in both places, with the first usage describing the action of the angels and the second the action of the mother-in-law of Peter. By using the same verb, Mark equates their level of service to Jesus. What the angels do for Jesus in the wilderness is what this woman now does for Jesus in her home.<sup>1</sup>

- Since gospel writer Mark uses the same verb in both places, the English translation should not denigrate the service of Peter’s mother-in-law compared to what the angels provide.

**Even more significantly, later in Mark Jesus uses this same action word/verb to describe his own ministry.** By doing so, he deeply values and honors loving service. More than that, he describes service as a corrective to the status-seeking or self-promotion he sees exhibited by other leaders. He differentiates himself from that and provides his own example of self-giving service.

Jesus says this in response to James and John, the disciples whom Jesus has just called earlier in chapter 1, who ask Jesus to confer a special status on them. When the other 10 disciples heard this, you can imagine that they were irritated. Jesus calls them and explains,

- ‘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. <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’ (Mark 10:42-45).

Jesus uses this same verb, ***diakoneo***, to describe his own ministry or purpose. His life and ministry are characterized by service.

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<sup>1</sup> Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *The Women’s Bible Commentary*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. P. 267.

There is one more use of this verb **diakoneo** later in Mark that can help us reflect on the role of Peter's mother-in-law:

Mark is describing the scene at the crucifixion of Jesus.

- Judas has betrayed Jesus (Mark 14:43-50).
- Peter has denied knowing Jesus and the last we hear of him, he is weeping in the temple courtyard (Mark 14:72).
- What about the other disciples? Mark says bluntly that “**All of them deserted him and fled**” (Mark 14:50).

But Mark describes some others:

<sup>40</sup>There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. <sup>41</sup>These used to follow him and *provided for him* when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem (Mark 15).

There were some others, some women, who looked on from a distance. They used to *follow him* and they *provided for him*. That phrase *provided for him* is from the verb *diakoneo*.

Mark is saying that Jesus' regular followers included more than just these 12 men. Specifically, there was a group of women who watched Jesus' execution “from a distance” while all the rest of Jesus' followers had betrayed him, denied him, or fled at his arrest.

Mark names some of the women—not all of them. It's not hard to imagine that Simon Peter's mother-in-law is among the serving women who observe Jesus' crucifixion from a distance.

It's not hard to see her as a follower of Jesus, one who is willing to serve as she follows, and one who is also a disciple.

## What's our Full Picture of this Woman?

The vast differences between our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture and the setting of the first century can make it hard to hear/see/identify what's going on and what's valued and how that differs from the general cultural norm.

Our initial glance may cause us to be suspicious that the quickness with which she gets up to serve only reinforces the limited sphere in which she has influence. And yet Jesus values her for what she does, describing his own ministry as one of service, contrasting his way from the self-assertion, even arrogance, exhibited by James and John.

He uses the same verb, ***diakoneo***, to describe his own life and ministry and contrasts his way with the way of the world.

The good news for us is that God is still at work through everyday people and their ordinary acts of service and loving kindness.

Extending our view of the mother-in-law of Peter, we may even picture her as a model disciple, one who could very well have viewed Jesus' death from a distance and who exhibited faithful discipleship, even while others fled.

Thanks be to God for faithful disciples who seek to serve even while hampered by cultural restrictions.