

“Strong to Serve”

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:29-39

“And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them” Mark 1:31

“Vicar, I just want to be strong enough to care for my daughters.” This was the answer given to me by a parishioner at my vicarage congregation in Kaukauna, Wisconsin when I asked her how she was doing. She had been suffering from muscular dystrophy and she was experiencing an increasing amount of pain and discomfort. As I arrived at her home for a routine visit and began to take my seat on the couch in her living room I asked the question and she gave me her sincere, heartfelt answer. “Vicar, I just want to be strong enough to care for my daughters.”

This parishioner had been struggling with the disease for a long time but her condition had recently taken a downturn. She was in a great deal of pain. As a result of the pain she could not be on her feet for very long. Because of the great deal of discomfort she experienced she could only sit in certain positions for so long and had to adjust frequently. But in the many visits I had with this parishioner I discovered that what bothered her most about her weakening condition was that she did not have enough strength and energy to take care of her daughters the way she used to.

Through our visits I learned that her daughters were well into their adult lives but they each had different disabilities that prevented them from living independently. Since their mother did not have enough strength to care for them and their father was working full time, the daughters had to live in different group homes in the area where they could receive the care and assistance they needed. But they would come and visit their mother frequently. And on the rare occasion that the mother had enough strength she would use it to care for her daughters.

I didn't realize it at the time but as I reflect back on my relationship with that parishioner I understand now that I was listening to and witnessing the desire of a child of God to serve the needs of others. I was hearing a mother's cry to care for the family that her Lord had given to her. I heard in her voice an eager longing to be made strong to serve. And even in the gloomiest days of her struggle with the disease, the Lord would grant her moments where she could serve and care for her daughters.

I bring to your attention this story because we catch a glimpse of this idea of being strengthened for service in our Gospel reading this morning. In our reading we learn a little bit more about the healing ministry of Jesus from the Gospel writer, Mark. In one of those acts of healing we see Jesus restoring and healing a woman's body for service.

This first healing that Mark records for us in our reading is more or less a “private” act of healing. It is private both in the sense that Jesus healed her of her fever in Simon and Andrew’s house with only a few disciples present, and also because the results or effects of the healing were not public or obvious. In fact, the picture is of the woman being instantly and miraculously cured, and then returning immediately to the simple, seemingly ordinary (but not unimportant or insignificant!) tasks of housekeeping and hospitality.

Through this healing act of Jesus we see that he restores ordinary human lives of service. The people he touches are not freed from their human responsibilities or relationship. On the contrary, Jesus’ touch removes everything which damages or obstructs our human lives of service.

Can’t we identify with the apparent desire for service and sense of duty that is felt both by the parishioner at my vicarage congregation and Simon Peter’s mother-in-law in our Gospel reading? Don’t we also feel that desire to love, nurture, serve, and care for the children or grandchildren or other family members and friends that God has given us? Don’t we at times desire to find different ways to express our love to those that we care about? Maybe it is most natural for us to show that love through words of affirmation, the giving of gifts, by spending quality time with a loved one, or by showing our affection through hugging, kissing, and holding hands. Or maybe we show that love best through different acts of service. Regardless of how we most naturally show our love and care for family members and friends and others, we all seem to have the desire and inclination.

As we see in our Gospel reading, human Sin and its crippling effects is often what prevents us from carrying out that desire to love and serve another in a way that fits our loving God’s standard as he expresses it in the Ten Commandments. Particularly, in our Gospel reading, we see the effect that human Sin has on our bodies. In turn, we see that when the effects of Sin do damage to our bodies through disease, aging, and deterioration, then it also has a serious effect on our human relationships, often putting to the test the bond of love between family members and friends.

The Gospel writer Mark shows us the effect of human Sin on our human bodies by taking us first into a private residence. There we see how human Sin manifested in the form of illness, sickness, and disease has not only affected the health of this woman and mother but how it has also damaged her ability effectively serve in the household and carry out her duties. Her illness and sickness has had a ripple effect through the house and through her relationships.

After taking us into this private residence then the Gospel writer takes us outside where we see residents of the city gathering at the doorstep of this house, bringing their loved ones who are sick with various diseases and even possessed by demons. We see the far reaching effect of Sin and its far reaching consequences. We too can take a quick survey of our experiences and have all the evidence we need to know that human Sin manifests itself in incredible ways through sickness, disease, and the deterioration of bodies.

It is curious to see in our Gospel reading that all the people are bringing their sick, diseased, and demon possessed loved ones to the doorstep of this private residence. Of course we know it is because their hope rests in one who is inside.

The news of Jesus' authoritative power to heal and restore bodies to full health could not be contained in a small Galilean private residence. No, this is good news! This is news that brings hope for all who suffer the effects of Sin, either directly or indirectly, through disease and sickness. There is one who can restore bodies and souls and brings true healing that also has a far reaching effect. The effect of this Jesus' healing touch restores not just bodies and souls for service but also restores human relationships and households to order.

This is the kind of kingdom that Jesus brings here to earth. It is the reign and rule of God seen through his preaching, healing, and driving out of demons. Jesus is establishing a reign of restoration of creation. Through his death and his resurrection he worked to defeat and conquer the power of Sin to bring eternal death and destruction to an entire creation—even to your body and soul. And so here in our Gospel reading Jesus' healing ministry and act of restoring bodies and souls, human relationships, and households to order once again foreshadows his greater work of salvation for the whole world. Each step of Jesus' public ministry of preaching and healing, from beginning to end, aims toward that for which God, the Father sent him in the first place. And that road leads to Jerusalem, to the cross, and finally out of the tomb.

The road of Jesus public ministry of preaching and healing leads to Jerusalem, to the cross, and to the empty tomb so that you too can participate in his healing ministry. We see in the Gospel reading that people are bringing their sick and diseased loved ones to Jesus for healing. We too were once brought to Jesus for healing and a washing away of Sin. We too are restored in body and soul to new life in Christ through the waters of Baptism. We too receive his eternal healing as we are brought to the doorstep of the Church each Sunday morning and come inside to hear the Gospel in Word, song, and prayer, and receive the medicine of immortality in the Lord's Supper. In these ways our bodies and souls are restored and strengthened in the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation gifts from our Lord. In these ways we are continually made strong to serve! Amen.