

“When the Fever Breaks”
Mark 1:29-39
First Presbyterian Church of Greenlawn
The Rev. Frederick H. Woodward February 5, 2012

Mark 1:29-39 (NIV)

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else-- to the nearby villages-- so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

When the Fever Breaks

I am not sure why our culture seems to have such a problem with mothers-in-law. I love mine, and I know that many of you who are fortunate to still have them love yours as well. But mothers-in-law sure get a bad rap. Mark Twain once declared Adam the luckiest man on earth because he didn't have one. Mencken defined conscience as a mother-in-law whose visit never ends. And Henny Youngman once remarked that he wanted to do something nice so he bought his mother-in-law a chair, only she wouldn't let him plug it in.

Our passage this morning concerns the only mother-in-law explicitly referred to in the NT.¹ Matthew, Mark and Luke all preserve the story of her healing, although it is among the shortest of the healing stories that are recorded in the Bible. (Matt. 8:14-15; Mark 1:30-31; Luke 4:38-39). All we are told is that Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and that hearing that she was sick, Jesus "went to her, took her hand and helped her up. (Then) the fever left her and she began to wait on them" (Mark 1:31). That's it.

Today I want to ask what this healing story may teach us, and what makes this story Gospel or good news for you and for me.

Maybe the first thing we need to note is that in antiquity, fever was regarded as an illness rather than as a symptom of the illness. In ancient times, people spoke of fever as they might of demon possession. While we might say that a fever "broke," Mark says that after Jesus took the hand of Simon's mother-in-law, the fever "let go of her" or "left her."

¹ Surely the most famous mother-in-law in all of scripture is Naomi, mother-in-law to Ruth.

In the Greek, there may even be a hint that Jesus and the fever were briefly locked in a sort of struggle, since according to Mark, Jesus didn't simply touch Simon's mother-in-law, he took or seized her hand, as if yanking her away from the clutches of her fever.

Our translation next says that Jesus "helped her up" but what Mark says literally in the Greek is that Jesus "raised her up." So what's the difference? The difference- and it is a difference that makes a difference- is that this is the verb Mark uses of the resurrection.

That's the verb that Mark chooses when he later tells us that Jesus said, "after I *have risen*, I will go ahead of you into Galilee" (Mark 14:28), and when the young man at the tomb tells the frightened women, "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. *He has risen!*" (Mark 16:6). He has been raised up!

I am not saying, of course, that Jesus resurrected Simon's mother-in-law from the dead here in the very first chapter of Mark. But I am saying that we may be meant to hear echoes of the resurrection nearly from the very start of Mark's Gospel. If we don't hear such an echo this morning, we may miss the good news of our passage for today. Why? Because Jesus means life. And that means that whenever Jesus comes on the scene, he raises us up. Jesus raises us up from everything that keeps us down, whether sickness, oppression, guilt, or even, or perhaps especially, our own fallenness.

We fall down. That is what it means to be human. And Jesus raises us up. That is what it means for him to be the Son of God.

In her healing, Simon's mother-in-law received a foretaste of the kingdom. For in delivering her from the grips of her fever, Jesus was raising her up for life abundant.

And so the question I would like all of us to ask ourselves this morning is, what do we do when the fever breaks? What do we do when, after Jesus' healing touch, we are finally restored again to our senses?

And what I want to suggest this morning is that we ignore the quips of Twain, Mencken and Youngman and pay attention instead to Simon's mother-in-law, because I think she has something important to teach us. For after Jesus took her hand and raised her up and the fever released its grip on her, Simon's mother-in-law modeled something important for us: she began to serve Jesus and the disciples. Here Mark probably means that she simply gave them something to eat.

But why report that detail at all? The first reason, I think, is that Mark was offering evidence that Jesus had indeed healed Simon's mother-in-law. She was sick with a fever, but Jesus made her whole again, and the way we know that she was made whole again was that she got up and began to serve everybody.

But such a report is likely to touch a raw nerve with some contemporary readers today who may wonder whether her healing served simply to reinforce existing cultural conventions and gender stereotypes. Such readers may well wonder whether the grand result of Simon's mother-in-law's healing was simply that she resumed the sort of menial work that was expected of women under the patriarchal domination system under which she lived. If so, where could good news be found in that?

But there's another important reason why Mark included this detail, and it is not, I think, to portray Simon's mother-in-law as a victim of social oppression even in her healing. No, what Mark helps us to see instead is that Simon's mother-in-law becomes in effect our Bible's first deacon, living out of the healing grace of God in Jesus Christ through service in his name.

How do we come up with that? Well, the first thing to note is that when he speaks of her service, the verb Mark uses is *diakoneo*, from which we get our words “deacon” and “diaconate.” *Diakoneo* is the verb commonly used in the NT not only of deacons (Acts 6:2-7; 1 Tim. 3:10, 13), but first and foremost of Jesus himself. For it was Jesus who said that he had come not to be *served*, but to *serve*, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 29:28; Mark 10:45; cf. Luke 22:27).

The second thing to note is that Jesus never commanded Simon’s mother-in-law to wait on anybody. She acted of her own initiative and, in so doing, seemed to get what the other disciples, including son-in-law, didn’t seem to get at all. For Simon’s mother-in-law intuitively understood that the proper response to the healing touch of Jesus is service in his name.

That was not an easy lesson for the disciples, particularly for Simon Peter, her son-in-law. For in Mark’s Gospel, Simon and the disciples were much more inclined to argue about who among them was the greatest than they were to serve others, which required Jesus to correct them with the reminder that if anyone wants to be first, that person must be last, must become, in other words, a *servant* of all (Mark 9:33-35). And the disciples were altogether unable to come to grips with Jesus’ conception of servant leadership. It was not only that they wanted to protect Jesus and themselves from the possibility that Jesus might be crucified. It is also that throughout Mark’s Gospel the disciples, and particularly Simon Peter, second-guessed Jesus as regards his vocational understanding, what Jesus was called to do as the Son of God.

And we see that practically from day one. Just a little later in the scene from the passage I just read, Simon Peter and the other disciples felt that it was their duty to hunt Jesus down, correct his course, and chastise him for being AWOL from his healing mission as they had come to understand it.²

But Jesus had a different conception of his vocation than they did. Yes, he had come to heal, but he had also come to preach what his healing itself proclaimed, that in him, the kingdom of God had come near, and with him, the victory had been assured over the powers of evil that were loosed in the world because of human sin and disobedience.

A lot of folks visit churches when they need healing, when they have hit hard times financially, and when, for whatever reason, their lives have come crashing down all around them. We in the church do what we can to assist them, both materially and spiritually, all in the name of Jesus Christ. Some of those to whom we minister never return to our church or any church. They go on as if nothing happened. And maybe for them, nothing decisive really has happened. Maybe they received some momentary help, but for them, that is the end of it. And yet there are others for whom something decisive has happened, and they choose to give back something of what they have graciously received.

² At Mark 1:36, it is said of Simon and those with him that they “went to look for him (sc. Jesus)” (NIV). Scholars note that this translation softens the meaning of *katadioko* (“hunt,” “pursue”) which characteristically has a hostile sense. What is clearer in the Greek than in the English is that the Simon Peter and the other disciples are aghast that, in the face of the people’s urgent needs for healing, Jesus could possibly go to a solitary place to pray instead. For that reason, the disciples feel it is necessary to both hunt Jesus down and restore him to his senses. In their remark, “Everyone is looking for you,” there is a note of correction and chastisement.

I met such a man a few weeks back who had called our church simply to volunteer. Although he holds his membership in another church, he called to offer assistance to our church because this church had once helped him in his time of need. Simon's mother-in-law would have been proud.

And then again the week before last, another man visited the church and shared with me his story about how over this last decade he had narrowly escaped death, not once but twice. When Jesus raised him up and his fever finally broke, he realized that one of the things he had to do with his life was to help others who may also have fallen down. What that meant for him practically was that he began to sponsor feverish addicts who, with God's help, he raised up for life. By God's grace, some of those whom he has helped are not only on their own feet again, but have also begun to serve others. Simon's mother-in-law would have been proud.

In a moment, we will gather again around the Lord's Table. We will remember the One who came not to be served, but to serve, and who has assured us that in our service to others in Jesus' name, we shall not lose our lives, but find them. Following the powerful example of Simon's mother-in-law, our Bible's first deacon, let those of us who have been raised up to our full stature serve others even as we ourselves have been served by the one who came to save us.

For now that our fever has broken, there is work to do. It is difficult work, but it is also good work in which we find fulfillment of our life's purpose. And one of the first things we might do is to thank Simon's mother-in-law, and all the other mothers-in-law in our lives who have helped and served us so much, yet have gotten such a bad rap.

To God be the glory!