

Peter's Mother-in-Law

Mark 1:29-39

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The story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law is a preacher's delight because there are three obvious points to be made. And it being Women's Week in the United Church of Christ, I was glad to find the lectionary offered a story with a woman at the center.

Mark, the writer of this narrative, is anxious to establish the kind of authority Jesus embodies. It is the authority of love. Mark wants the church community to know and to celebrate the truth that Jesus is not afraid of the demons of that day; in fact, it's just the opposite. The demons of that day recognized and dreaded the authority of love he held over them. The demons of that day, loosely defined, were anything that engendered fear, anything that robbed a person of a sense of well-being. What the demons couldn't withstand was the authority of love. Love casts them out. They have no defense against love. This may be Mark's primary contribution to Christian theology. Love casts out fear!

Two weeks ago, at our annual meeting, we elected numerous people to be officers of the church and to serve on boards and committees and to be leaders among us for the next 12 months. By our vote, we have authorized them to lead. But it will be their willingness to love people that will establish their authority. That's what Mark wanted the First Century church to know, and he'd want the 21st Century Church to know the same. Jesus is able to heal Peter's mother-in-law because he is able to establish an environment of love.

Every mother knows how to do this, and some fathers do, too. Mothers know how to pick up a wounded child or a child with a runny nose or a child with a fever, and hold them just so, sing to them a lullaby, warm up a moist face cloth, rock them just so. My Nana Allen had this gift in spades. Any little hurt we may have incurred within her jurisdiction was immediately attended to with great slobbery kisses and grandiose fussing and maybe even a dish of ice cream. No wound had a chance of survival up against such a force of love.

Some men can do this, I know; but women seem to have a gift for creating an environment of love where the authority of fear or other authorities shrink back. So, as we go about our many ministries in the coming year, we would all do well to carry this story of Peter's mother-in-law with us. Establishing an environment of love is where ministry begins. Without love, there can be no healing. Without love there can be no envisioning. Without love, there can be no moments of "aha!"

The second thing we see in this story is that Jesus enters the room where Peter's mother-in-law abides, and he takes her hand. He holds her hand in his. This is his way of assuring her she is not alone. Whatever the demon may be; it's always easier to face it knowing you are not alone. This hand-holding scene plays out over and over with every hospital chaplain. Whether it's Eunice Meshrow I visit or Johnnie Wasserman or Randy LaRocca, my first impulse is to move to the bed and to grab a hold of a hand. To make that human connection is also to make a sacred connection because the love flows freely from hand to hand.

Peter's mother-in-law has a fever. She may have an infection somewhere in her body. She may be delirious. She is certainly frightened. So, what we have here is an ideal model for a bedside manner. I've heard of certain surgeons described as lacking a good bedside manner. Jesus got it right.

He moved right in, met the woman in her feverish state, and held her hand such that she felt connected, again, to her community.

Mark wants his First Century church and also the 21st Century church to know that people sometimes feel disconnected from their faith community. This happens for countless reasons. We could enumerate them here; we don't have to. Mark's point is that churches need to do whatever they need to do to reach out to people who are feeling disconnected, to make that sacred connection, to hold that hand, to re-establish that bond.

When Jesus did reach out to Peter's mother-in-law, she stood right up on her own two feet. It's as if she were just waiting for such a hand. I can think of a number of men and women and youth and children who seem to have disappeared from this community. Where are they? Are they feverish? Disenchanted? Angry? Out of gas? Burned out? It may be that they, like Peter's mother-in-law, are just waiting for someone to come along with a hand out-stretched.

Thirdly, having been healed of her fever and back on her own two feet, Peter's mother-in-law is overcome with gratitude. And she expresses her gratitude by taking on the servant role and offering those present a cup of tea. Mark reduces it to four words, 'and she served them.' The issue here is grasping the connection between gratitude and servanthood. Mark sees that the vitality of the church has something to do with this mysterious connection.

I know that it would be very hard for me to be a servant among you if I weren't thankful for all your gestures of kindness and caring. When Peter's mother-in-law realized her fever had left her, her one and only thought was to express her gratitude through some act of service, in this case an act of hospitality.

I believe it was Mark's conviction that a healthy church is one that is constantly in touch with its gratitude: its gratitude for life, its gratitude for finding meaning in life, its gratitude for what was accomplished on the Cross and for the amazing discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning.

It is this gratitude, then, that motivates us to go off on a mission trip or to sing in a choir or to feed the folks at Peter's Retreat or to glean turnips with Food Share or to teach a church school class or become involved with social action. It's gratitude for Christ's redeeming work among us that energizes us for Habitat trips and for Heifer Farm encampments and for standing outside all night by a burn barrel to call the community's attention to the plight of the homeless.

When gratitude is absent, the mission of the church dries up. So Mark is very intentional about the way he ends his story. This unnamed woman, this mother-in-law, so filled with gratitude for her new lease of life, looks for a way to be the servant.

I find myself wishing I knew her name. "Peter's mother-in-law" doesn't quite cut it. I've been thinking of calling her, Mildred, after my own mother-in-law. Like the woman in the story, Mildred Kirsch was constantly aware of her gratitude and always looking for the next service project to undertake.

This is how the text was speaking to me this week, and as always I share this reflection with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.