



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 5 (B)

#### Loving Service

[RCL] Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Servant ministry is presented in our Gospel reading for today in a way that first sounds like something much less than Good News as we meet Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Three verses of scripture contain everything we know about this healing encounter. Listen as I read these three verses a second time. While I do so, imagine the scene:

“As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”

Mark tells us that the men in the family have been together with a couple of friends at a church meeting. They come in all excited from their evening at the synagogue. They're hungry and they've brought another friend with them. The woman of the house is down with a fever and now her son-in-law is bringing home a hungry group from the church meeting. Perfect.

Then Jesus enters the story. He takes the feverish matriarch by the hand and lifts her up. In the process, she is healed, made whole. Now she gets up out of bed and waits on them. One minute, she's lying in bed with a fever, the next minute, she's fetching drinks and chips and trying to figure out if she's got enough food in the house to scrape together a meal for all these hungry men. Where is the good news for Simon's mother-in-law?

The part that stands out as awkward is that she gets up and begins to serve them. The word for “serve” used here is the Greek word *diakonos*, which means “to wait tables.”

The life-giving transformation in these few verses from Mark is revealed in that one word in the story that causes the most problems. After all, if it said that she got up and began to talk with them, or began to eat with them, the story wouldn't be such a problem. But Mark is clear that Simon Peter's mother-in-law began to serve them.

Mark used the Greek word for service—*diakonos*—which means to wait tables. But the word *diakonos* meant much more to the Christian community for which Mark wrote the Gospel. To talk about service using this word in the early Christian church was to use charged language. The word *diakonos* was a word used a lot among the early Christians. *Diakonos* gives us the name for the Sacred Order of Deacons.

To “deacon” for others meant more than waiting tables, even if that was included. Mark’s prior description of serving another opens up the meaning. Earlier in the first chapter of the gospel, Mark used the same word to describe the way the angels ministered to Jesus after his forty days in the wilderness. This word for the work of angels Mark used in quoting Jesus about his ministry: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Jesus described his own life and ministry on earth as service using the word *diakonos*. Jesus told his disciples that they were to be deacons for God. Their work for God would be menial. The disciples’ service to others would be difficult. Yet, the life of service Jesus described as a life of *diakonos*, a life of being a servant minister, was the heart of his ministry as well.

Now we can return to our three verses of scripture. Simon’s mother-in-law had a life-changing encounter with the Messiah. Jesus came into her house and touched her. In Jesus’ life-changing touch, Simon Peter’s mother-in-law was healed and made whole. Perhaps this is where you want to find yourself in the story. Are you looking for a life-changing encounter with God? Perhaps it has been a long time since you have felt that healing touch. If so, you have come to the right place. Right now, right here, you can put your trust in Jesus to begin your own life-changing journey, as you discover the grace, mercy, and love God has for you.

For those of us who have felt the touch of Jesus in our lives, we find ourselves alongside Simon’s mother-in-law in this story. Mark describes Jesus going to her, touching her, and healing her in the past tense. Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up and the fever left her. These are all described as actions that are over and done with.

But Mark said that Simon’s mother-in-law served them using a different verb tense—the imperfect tense. This imperfect tense means that she began “deaconing,” has continued to deacon, and, as far as we know, is out there deaconing still.

The imperfect tense refers to an action that is begun but not completed. This one shift of verb tense means that she began to serve them and continued to serve them. Her service was not a one-time, over-and-done-with action, like cooking a meal. Simon’s mother-in-law began to serve Jesus and his followers. But the meaning of her actions was transformed by Jesus’ healing touch. She did not serve and minister to them because of some duty. She served out of love. Simon’s mother-in-law became as much a follower of Jesus as any of his disciples. Simon’s mother-in-law was not ordained – no one was, at this point. Yet Mark

describes her using language that makes her the first deacon in Christianity. She was the first person to have their ordinary *diakonos*, or service of others, transformed into servant ministry.

The Early Church called persons ordained deacons to care for the physical needs of the congregation. Both men and women were ordained as deacons. This order of ministry takes the care and compassion of the church into the community and brings the needs of the community to the attention of the church.

For the church to be the Body of Christ that God means it to be, we just don't need that many deacons or priests and very few bishops. 99 in 100 Christians are not called to ordained ministry because God needs more students, nurses, engineers, scientists, plumbers, policemen, pharmacists, librarians, moms, dads, grandparents, and so on, set on fire by the power of the Holy Spirit. The work of deacons and priests is not *instead* of the priesthood of all believers, but in *support* of the ministry of all the baptized. The ministry of deacons, priests, and bishops does not let the rest of the Body of Christ sit back as passive consumers of faith. Each of us has our own unique way to live into this call, according to the gifts the Holy Spirit has given us.

We are to follow the example of this early disciple, Simon Peter's mother-in-law. After we have come to know Jesus and have experienced the forgiveness and healing he offers, we are to respond to the love God has shown us by sharing that love with those around us. And, as you share God's love, you are living into your own vocation as a minister of the Gospel as a teacher, attorney, real estate agent, salesperson, doctor, volunteer, parent, grandparent, spouse, friend to the glory of God. Your ordinary work will be ministry, not by virtue of ordination, but by virtue of baptism.

And we share the love and grace we have known in Jesus we offer that listening ear, kind word, and helping hand, and in the process, we experience the love of God flowing through us. Far from a chore, that loving service is how love grows within us. Amen.

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