

SERMON: Jesus, Healer
TEXT: Mark 1:29-39

2-7-21

I have heard and read a number of stories this past year - I'm sure you have, too, - about women giving birth while suffering from the coronavirus. I saw one the other day about a woman whose newborn was released from the hospital before she was, as she was still being treated for the disease. Finally, she recovered, and was able to return home. To a newborn, plus three other *young* children, probably all under the age of 5 or 6.

I'm sure she was thrilled to be well enough to return home, though she was not fully recovered. There was a photo of her at home with an oxygen tube in her nose, her newborn in her arms, and the other three children by her side. And she looked exhausted. I'm sure she adores her children. And I'm hoping she has lots of help - from her husband, relatives, friends, and neighbors. She's going to need it.

For so many mothers - especially new mothers, I think - this new role they play, this new purpose they have has become their number one priority, soaring high above all other priorities. This is as it should be. And I can't imagine having to be relieved of many of your new mother responsibilities because your own health won't allow it.

I remember being a new mother. It was an honor and a joy. And a challenge. I will admit that I was more than happy to let my husband do his part as a new parent. But, for several weeks at least, I also fully embraced and claimed the title and role of mother as my number one purpose in life. And it was difficult to relinquish my responsibilities to anyone - especially to take care of myself.

On the other hand, I also consider myself a fully liberated woman. So, I used to have trouble with today's scripture from Mark about Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law. First of all, there's the obvious temptation to insert a cliché mother-in-law joke. Even if I don't make a joke, some of you are probably thinking along those lines. But worse than that is the fact that this woman immediately jumps into service the moment Jesus heals her. It's difficult for a woman not to feel a little offended by this. Jesus heals her, helps her out of bed, the fever leaves her, and she begins to serve the [men]. Ugh!

But digging a little deeper, I learned that this was exactly the kind of healing Peter's mother-in-law would have hoped for. Like a new mother caring for her infant, this woman very likely believed it to be her purpose - and an honorable purpose at that - to show hospitality to important guests. It was a privilege for her to be the senior woman in the household. So her healing restores her position of

status rather than subservience as we assume. And it would have been humiliating for her to have to remain in bed with guests present, and to entrust that responsibility to someone less capable.

Jesus, as healer, not only cures her physical ailment, but raises her up to resume her position in the household and in society. This gift is for her more than it is for those whom she is pleased and proud to serve.

Furthermore, there are some hints in Mark's writing that indicate an even deeper significance for this woman and the role she plays. This is the first among many acts of healing that Jesus accomplishes in Mark. And it is a woman who is healed. Jesus deems an unnamed, ordinary woman worthy of healing. This shows that Jesus notices and cares for those whom the rest of society does not see and does not care for. And this will become a pattern in his ministry.

Mark writes that Jesus "took her by the hand and lifted her up," but the original Greek is best translated, "raised her up." The same phrase is used repeatedly by Mark in other healing stories. Healing was Jesus' ministry of resurrection, according to one scholar. "The healing of Peter's mother in law is the

first resurrection story in the gospel.” (Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, www.workingpreacher.org,

February 4, 2018)

This same scholar continues, “Having been *raised*, she *serves* them. On the most literal level it may mean that she gets up and prepares and serves food. But the verb *to serve* is another key term in Mark’s gospel...meaning both to serve at a table and to do ministry.” The same verb “is used of the angels in the wilderness who *serve* [Jesus]... and of the women who followed Jesus and served him...

Serving epitomizes Jesus’ own ministry, [as he described it]: *For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.* (Mark 10:45).” Peter’s mother-in-law can be considered one of his first disciples, “an icon of resurrection and a paradigm of Christian ministry.” (Cynthia Briggs Kittredge,

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Mark continues, “That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door.” Word of Jesus, the healer has spread quickly. Suffering is widespread in Capernaum and beyond. People are desperate for healing, and suffering does not discriminate.

Since February is Black History Month, I will be sharing some stories in my sermons, and we will also enjoy an African American Spiritual following the sermon each Sunday. Today we will be hearing an old recording of the Tuskegee Institute Choir singing, *Balm in Gilead*.

A history of this hymn notes that it is based on Jeremiah, Chapter 8, in which Israel was in exile. Their captors, the Babylonians, were preparing to violate their holy places for treasure, dishonoring their dead. “This is a chapter of judgment and hopelessness.... It is the most desperate and despondent time in Israel’s history. The chapter ends with three rhetorical questions: *Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?* (Jeremiah 8:22, KJV)” (C. Michael Hawn, *History of Hymns: There is a Balm in Gilead*, www.umcdiscipleship.org, March 19, 2019)

One might assume that slaves would certainly be asking similar questions of their God. Instead of a question, though, the spiritual surprisingly gives an answer, a statement of confidence and faith. *There IS a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.*”

It’s always been amazing to me how so many of the spirituals written and sung by slaves are so full of praise for God and trust in God’s power and love.

Even after long, hot days of working in cotton fields with not enough food or water or rest. Even after being constantly and savagely beaten and abused by their owners for minor offenses or often just for sport. Even after their children were sold and their wives were raped and their neighbors and friends were hanged and burned. Even after all their suffering, the black community gathered for church, worshipped God, prayed to Jesus, and sang - by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit - of their confidence in Jesus as Savior and healer.

Like he did with Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus notices the slaves of that time and the people of color today. Jesus deems them worthy of healing. Jesus takes them by the hand and lifts them up, raises them up, resurrects them again and again, only for them to be beaten down again and again. Despite generations of slavery and oppression, of abuse and hatred, they sing about a spiritual healing for the sin-sick soul. They prayed for mercy and forgiveness.

Indeed, we all need such healing. May the unfailing faith shown in African-American spirituals call us to see them, to work toward healing the oppression they suffer, and to stand beside them as they continue to strive for equality. May we be inspired by their perseverance, their courage, and their hope in the face of hopelessness to pray for the sin-sick soul of the whole human race.

May God our Creator and Jesus our healer and the Spirit our comforter heal our wounds and make us whole. As we join our spirits together around his table, may all of humanity become one through our sharing in Christ's body and blood. May we be nourished and strengthened to serve as we have been served and to love as we have been loved. To the glory of God.

AMEN.