

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

February 4, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 1: 29-39)

As soon as [Jesus and the disciples] 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.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's Gospel takes place in Capernaum. We hear a lot about Capernaum in the scriptures. So today I want us to enter this town of Capernaum beside the Sea of Galilee. I want you to put yourself in this town, walk its streets, see its homes, meet its people.

To start out, you need to know that Capernaum was not exactly a major city. In fact, it was more of a wide space in the road. Capernaum was actually only about twenty-five acres in size. That would be one-half the size of Macalester College campus. Interestingly enough, the population was about a thousand, which is almost exactly one-half the size of Macalester's student body. In comparison to the big cities of Sepphoris or Tiberius or Caesarea, this was just a little village.

Archeologists have found no city gate, no paved roads, no school, no town hall, no theater, and no shop buildings. Just houses, in kind of a random pattern. They are not even-ordered well. The houses are poorly made, with some stones, and thatch, and crooked beams. Few possessions, other than oil lamps, or dishes, or fishing implements. This was a poor fishing village – people just getting by. Think small town in Appalachia, or maybe somewhere way off the beaten path in South Dakota.

Dominic Crossan tell us it was oppressively hot in the summer, the fields surrounding it were rocky and hard to grow anything in, and it was on no major trade route. He says, "It was not a sought-out place, but a good place to get away from, with easy access across the Sea of Galilee to anywhere."¹

Today's Gospel is set in the village of Capernaum. A backwater town on the road to nowhere. And this is where Jesus, the Savior of the world, came. And Jesus healed a nameless woman in a back room of a backwater town. Why? Why there? Why her? Why healing?

Well, some will say Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law because he needed her; you know, he and the disciples aren't used to cooking their own meals, and they need her to serve them lunch because they can't boil water. Others would say just the opposite. That she needs him; in the way we all need Jesus to heal us.

But I would say it's a lot deeper than that. I think this healing of a nameless woman in a backwater town is the very living-out of the good news of God's reign among us. This is the heart of Jesus' mission and ministry. And I think this whole ministry is summed up in one verse.

So I want you to take your bulletin out, open it up to the Gospel for today, and find Verse 31 in the Gospel. Mark, Chapter 1, Verse 31. And if you have a pen or pencil, I want you to underline it or circle it or stick some arrows toward it, so you can take it home and put it on your refrigerator and meditate on it this week. Mark: Chapter 1, Verse 31 – read it with me.

"He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." And there it is. *"[Jesus] came, took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them."*

He came and took "her" by the hand. This nobody, from nowhere, small, unknown, invisible. But isn't that the way healing always starts? This cell knits with that cell; the fever goes down a little; this joint can move just a little further today. It is the way of things. Healing starts small. Life starts small. Love starts small. Even the resurrection started small, shrouded in mystery, hidden in a tomb. We get stuck on this idea of miracles as something big, and flashy, and instant, and dramatic, and we forget that the more important issue here is healing. The miracle is that she was healed. And most of the time healing is not fast, or linear, or pretty. But it is no less the work of God. It is no less miracle.

Dale Ryan argues:

"There's a terrible thing that happens when you make a connection between spiritual power and fast. If you serve a god that's only capable of doing miracles that happen fast, you only have a shadow of the living and true God. The living and true God has no problem with

¹ Crossan, John Dominic; Reed, Jonathan L., *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts: Revised and Updated* (Kindle Location 2377), HarperCollins, Kindle Edition.

things that take time, even a long time. God has a long track record of working on people with struggles that take a long time. Some stuff may take a new heaven and a new earth, but that is not outside of God's timeframe."²

Miracles don't have to be fast or big or in front of the crowds. Every moment, every breath, is a miracle because it is infused with the presence of God. Every healing, every forgiveness, every moment of connection, is a miracle.

Jesus went to a woman with a fever in the back room of an unknown town. He took her hand. Mark doesn't say how long he held her hand or what he said to her. But she was healed. And the healing was miracle.

Sometimes that mother-in-law is us. Aching for a kind word, a kind face to alleviate the pain or loneliness. Sometimes we are just depleted from too much work, too much caring, and need to touch the hand of God for a time. How many of us in this church or city or country or world are that mother-in-law, in a back room of nowhere, who needs to see the face of compassion, needs to be renewed for a moment, needs to be in the presence of love. Jesus came and took her hand. And a small miracle began. The presence of love brings new life and healing.

But that's not all. Go back to that text. *"[Jesus] came, and took her by the hand and lifted her up."* No! That's not right. Cross out "lifted." He did not lift her up. He "raised" her up. "Raised her up." I do not know why translators don't use the right translation there. It's so much better. "He raised her." It is the same word that Mark uses to describe Easter Sunday morning. *"Jesus is not here. He is raised."* Translators lessen this verse by saying, *"he lifted her."*

Resurrection is not only that world-changing moment of Easter Sunday morning. Resurrection is all around us. Just like miracles are all around us. Resurrection is finding new life, or forgiveness, or purpose, or finding community. These things raise us up. They give us life. And that is resurrection. Small acts can bring resurrection. Everywhere there are opportunities for new life and community and resurrection.

I talk with people after they have retired or left a job, for whatever reason, and I often hear them say that they are kind of adrift. They don't know what to do with themselves. They've lost their identity, or their reason for being, or their way of giving themselves to the world. They need resurrection. Sickness does the same thing. It isolates people. Ask the people in this community who have suffered long-term illness or depression. It keeps people from being what they were created to be. They need some form of life, of resurrection.

Peter's mother-in-law was isolated in that back room. She can't be herself. She can't show hospitality, which was her way of connecting with the world. What Jesus does is not just cure her. He gives her life. He raises her up.

² Dale Ryan, "Thoroughness vs. Speed" <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/thoroughness-vs-speed>, accessed 2/3/18.

Again, when we focus on a quick miracle of her fever going away, we are missing the larger healing, the larger rising into new life in community. Which looks way different than just getting out of bed.

Okay. Once more, back to the verse.

“He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”

“Serve them.” “Diakonia” – from which we get our word “deacon.” She began to minister to them. This woman ministered in the way she was able. Now that she was given back her strength, her community, her purpose, she gave of herself. As do we all.

We are all raised and sent out to raise others. We’re strengthened to strengthen others. We’re healed so that we can heal others. When Jesus was raised on Easter, he didn’t just disappear. He was raised to help us know resurrection.

In all the ways we can, we give the resurrection, the life that we have received. Performing small miracles, starting growth, starting life, giving healing. Maybe it’s not real flashy. Maybe it’s just holding someone’s hand, and telling them, “You got this.” Or helping them grow into a new lifestyle, or working beside them as they try to make a difference. There are so many ways we can raise others up, because we have been raised.

Debie Thomas, struggling with how to give life, wrote this:

“Someday, somehow, all will be well, but all is not well yet. So the great task, the great sorrow, the great calling, the great journey, is to live graciously and compassionately in this vast and often terrible in-between. To offer the comfort of my steady presence to those who suffer. To keep myself from making promises that are not mine to make. To create and to restore community, family, and dignity to those who have to walk through this life sick, weak and wounded – without cures. And to make sure that no one who has to die – and that’s all of us, in the end – that no one dies alone and unloved, if I can help it.”³

In a back room of a backwater town, a woman is healed. Why there? Why her? To show us that we all stand in the midst of the miracles and resurrection, and we have been given the ability and the opportunity to raise others up as well.

Amen.

³Debie Thomas, “Mystery, Not Magic” <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1640>, accessed 2/3/18.