

Called to Serve  
Mark 1:29-31  
February 18, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Last Sunday, according to the liturgical calendar, was the Feast of the Transfiguration, and so, that was the story that Fred preached about: the day – late in Jesus’ public ministry – when he takes Peter, James, and John and goes up a high mountain, and these disciples see Jesus suddenly transformed into a bright, heavenly light. In the Gospel of Mark, this story comes in Chapter 9. Today, I want to back up all the way to Chapter 1, to the very first day of Jesus’ public ministry, and pick up the story where I left off before my vacation.

You may remember that the last time I was here, I preached about Jesus’ speaking with the authority of Almighty God to cast out an “unclean spirit.” It was his first act of public ministry, according to Mark, and it occurred on the Sabbath, which caused a stir. In today’s text, still on that same Sabbath, Peter invites Jesus and his four first disciples (Peter, Andrew, James, and John) to Peter’s house, I suppose for a nice meal and a place to stay the night. As soon as they arrive, however, they learn that Peter’s mother-in-law, their hostess, is sick in bed with a fever.

I’d like you to think back to the last time you had the flu, or COVID – fatigue pressing you down into the bed; you can hardly lift your arm; used tissues scattered everywhere; aching all over; a deep, racking cough; perhaps wondering if you will ever be well again, if you will ever be fit to be in the company of other people. You feel like “death warmed over.” Do you remember?

Now imagine if your son-in-law shows up unexpectedly at that moment, the son-in-law who has just abandoned the family business and left his aging father to fend for himself, THAT son-in-law shows up out of the blue with himself and four other guests for you to feed and house for the night. The nerve of him! I imagine that whatever small energy you possess would surely be focused like a laser beam on your son-in-law, sending him telepathic messages to take these strangers with him and hit the road. I know that is what I would want to do.

But that is not what happens. Instead, Jesus comes to stand by the sick bed. He is not afraid to touch. He takes Peter’s mother-in-law by the hand and lifts her up. The Greek verb here is the same one that Mark uses a few chapters later to describe Jesus’ lifting Jairus’s daughter from death back to life, and that may be exactly how Peter’s mother-in-law feels. Not just healed, but lifted up. Resurrected. Returned to life.

And then, Mark says, the fever leaves her, and she begins to serve them.

Now, part of me wants to say to all those men, “Could you just make your own dinner for once? This woman has been really sick. Give her a break!” But then I notice that the Greek word here for “serve” has the same base as the word “deacon.” It is the kind of service that deacons do. Jesus has called this woman back to life, not merely to return to an old, subordinate role in the patriarchy, but to a ministry of service. This woman, nameless in scripture, is the first deacon. She understands Jesus’ ministry and adopts it as her own.

Now let's recall the famous story about James and John that we find in Chapter 10. Listen now for the word of God:

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to Jesus and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking.... To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." And Jesus said to all the disciples, "...Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...."

The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.

James and John have been with Jesus throughout his public ministry. They were there at the beginning, when Peter's mother-in-law was healed. They were there through all the healings and parables that followed. They were even permitted to be with Jesus on the mountain top, when he was transfigured into a heavenly light, and they still don't get it. They are arguing about who will take precedence in heaven, when Jesus is in glory, when all is made right with the world. They want to be at the head of the line. And Jesus says, "No. Whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all, for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve."

~ ~ ~

Sometimes, as Christians, we are called to do difficult or dangerous things, to stand up against evil in the name of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, we have to be willing to drink from the same bitter cup that Jesus did. But today's scripture tells us that most of the time, most of us don't have to do grand things at all to be true to our call as Christians. We don't all have to be able to preach or sing or interpret scripture. We do all have to serve the people around us, to make their lives easier, to make the guests in our home and in our church feel welcome, to make sure they are nourished in body as well as in spirit. No matter who we are, no matter what gifts we have or lack, this is a call we can all say yes to.

You would think that James and John would have learned that lesson from walking with Jesus. Peter's mother-in-law got it in one second, in one touch. She is healed. She rises from her sick bed, from the bed where she lay close to death, and her immediate response is to get busy serving the people around her, even the son-in-law who ran away from home with this stranger. She was the first deacon, the one who got Jesus' message immediately and followed him. THAT is ministry. And THAT is the life to which we are called as followers of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Amen