

## “Take My Hand”

Mark 1: 29-39

February 5, 2012

She has a name, but we do not know what it is. Neither are we told why the mother-in-law of Simon Peter is at her son-in-law's home. She may be there because she is a widow and finds shelter. Perhaps Simon's wife has died and she is there to keep house. For whatever reason, the woman is there in Simon Peter's house and she is in the grip of a fever. A fever, as Sarah Henrich points out, is no small matter in the ancient world. “A fever was not only debilitating for a short while,” as most of us know from our own experience, but a fever “was often a symptom of a condition that could lead to death.” Without the medicine we have today, the same is true for us. In this story, a valued family member is unable to be herself or to do her work. “Her calling has been taken away from her by an illness.” (Heinrich)

Simon is there, of course, and so is his brother Andrew. New disciples James and John are guests. Fresh from his healing event in the synagogue, Jesus also is there in Simon's home, too. Immediately (Mark's favorite word!), Jesus is told about Simon's fevered mother-in-law. In the rapidly unfolding story of Mark's gospel, Jesus takes her hand and lifts her up. The verb “lift” is also translated “raise.” Simon Peter's mother-in-law is raised up by Jesus. Later in this gospel comes the story of an epileptic boy whom Jesus also takes by the hand and raises up. (9:27) At the close of his gospel, Mark applies the same word to Jesus through the mouth of an angel, “Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen.” (16:6) Lift. Raised up. “The word suggests new strength is imparted to those laid low by illness, unclean spirits, or even death, so that they may again be raised up to take their place in the world.” (1:31) At Jesus' hand comes blessing - that they, too, may be a blessing.

I appreciate Jan Richardson's comment that points to “the domestic Jesus.” Not “domesticated,” but the Jesus who enters into the ordinary, everyday activities and into the intimacy of a family life and home. With his outstretched hand, Jesus conveys that there is no sphere to keep him out, no place where he does not desire wholeness. In Mark's gospel Jesus moves from Synagogue, to home and into community. There are no boundaries to his blessing.

In response to her blessed healing, Simon Peter's mother-in-law begins to serve Jesus and his companions. When this news is received through the filter of present sensibilities, one could add comment about an un-liberated woman who is barely off her sickbed taking care of men who can't even make a sandwich for themselves! A closer reading of the story reveals something much more liberating for all of us. Again, the clue lies in the language Mark uses. The verb “serve” it turns out is the same verb Jesus uses when he describes his ministry, claiming, “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.” (15:41) The blessing of serving is to mark Jesus' followers. Here this unnamed woman is the first person in this gospel to display true discipleship. Meanwhile, her action contrasts with her own son-in-law who calls Jesus' attention to the crowd clamoring for more healings while Simon himself does nothing about them. (Williamson)

Without a word, she serves Jesus and the others gathered in that home. In those times these acts are within the realm of what she, as a woman, did. Restored again to the social order, she honors her guests with hospitality. She exercises her calling and they break bread together. She does this as an act of grace, and in so doing unveils the presence of holiness in the midst of ordinary, daily life. Blessed, she enacts blessing. Once more, the details of Mark's use of particular verbs illumines action. According to one commentary (quoted by Jan Richardson as *The Women's Bible Commentary*), the English word "serve" comes from the Greek word "diakoneo,." We get the word "deacon" from it. This same word describes what angels do for Jesus at the end of his forty days in the wilderness. "Angels came and ministered to him." (1:13) The action of angels is the same as the action of the unnamed woman whose fever has fled. Soon the threshold of the door of this woman's place of serving becomes an opening for healing for all the city.

Jesus takes her hand and raises her up and she serves. Jesus takes her by the hand and restores her to her calling and her participation in community, serving others, even as Jesus serves. Like her ancient ancestor Sarah, she is blessed to be a blessing, doing what is within her power amid the rhythm of her days. Meanwhile, her healing announces an intimate in-breaking of God's realm and Jesus' power to restore, to save, to heal all sorts of fevers - including our own.

We get ourselves heated up, feverish over issues in our lives. Sometimes our feverish pursuits have the same effect as a physical illness. Soon we find ourselves cut off from others, isolated, and unable to do much of anything, let alone serve others.

Once someone told me he was not feeling well because he was suffering from OBE. He explained OBE is shorthand for "overcome by events." If listening to the news every day is not enough for an onset of "OBE," there are unexpected consequences of our choices that can sap our energies and fore-shorten our vision.

When he was preaching a sermon on this text in Bethlehem about 400 AD, Jerome provides words which could well be our own:

"O that He would come to our house and enter and heal the fever of our sins by his command. For each and every one of us suffers from fever. When I grow angry, I am feverish. So many vices, so many fevers." Jerome prays to an apostle to speak to Jesus, but now we speak directly to him in similar words: "Come to us and touch our hand; for if he touches our hand, at once the fever flees."

"Breathe through the heats of our desire Thy coolness and Thy balm" goes the hymn. "Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on," we sing even as we pray. Sometimes in desperation yet always with hope, we put out our hand in order to feel him reaching toward us in power and compassion. For a while we may need to "wait for the Lord" aware of God's presence that knows no boundaries, but always in the awareness that we won't be left the same. He will ask us to serve, too - in his name - and with our hands as a blessing to others.

Jesus "came and took her by the hand and lifted - raised - her up. Then the fever left her."

When I read this story I want to be like the one who is blessed and who serves, but too often I am more like Peter, Andrew, James and John. I don't quite get what Jesus is showing. I don't quite comprehend what Jesus is inviting me to do. Perhaps my own fever still needs to be removed in

order for my attention to be restored. Perhaps there is something in me that recognized that to be restored, I must first name the fever, or grapple with forces that require my willingness to give up. I like to be blessed - but sometimes I fear the change that would be involved, the service I might be asked to render even in love's name. And yet here is Jesus, inviting participation in every day miracles, and living into wholeness in him. "Take my hand," my soul cries out.

"Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her." We see this domestic scene and observe through Jesus the power of touch, of nearness, to make whole. P.C. Enniss captures the scene as writes: "Jesus must have understood that which we are too often slow to comprehend. Love not expressed, not felt, is difficult to trust. That is the reason for Jesus. God knew our human need for nearness. Jesus is the incarnation of God's love, which makes it all the more demanding to realize that for some people, we are the only Jesus they will ever meet."

In your home, at your place of work, in your dormitory, your school, the places where you live and move and have your being, as Christ's own - called to serve, to love, to lift up, Christ wants to show up through you! What lies in your power to do? To whom will you extend your hand? Blessed by the living Christ, in his name, through your hand be a blessing.

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