

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal, 2/4/2024, Mark 1:29-39 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

When ruminating over today's Gospel, I kept hearing the voice of my New Testament seminary professor, John Yieh. Dr. Yieh insisted that every book in the New Testament had a "key verse," and he made us memorize these verses and regurgitate them on exams. I have forgotten most of the key verses, I'm sorry to say, but I remember that in Mark, Dr. Yieh's "key verse" was 10:45: "For the Son of Man came not to *be* served but *to* serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Maybe this sounds weird to you because we aren't in chapter ten yet: we are still in the jam-packed first chapter of Mark's Gospel. Jesus got baptized and driven into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan and then waited on by angels. He called his first disciples, and then last Sunday, our Gospel of Mark chapter one reading showed Jesus teaching in the temple before exorcising an unclean spirit out of a disturbed individual.

Now Jesus is out of the public eye and in a private home, the home that Simon and Andrew left behind to follow him a few verses ago. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That's the part that makes me think of the key verse: she began to serve them. The Greek word translated here as "serve" is the same word used earlier in the chapter, when we heard that the angels "waited on" Jesus after he was tempted in the desert. And it's the same word used in "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." And it's the same root from which we get our word deacon. Like our own saintly Deacon Bill, whom I know we all miss having up here, distributing the body of Christ and blessing us with his presence, and teaching us how to serve, because that's what deacons do. They serve, and Deacon Bill is the best of the best when it comes to deacons.

Some theologians get annoyed that Simon's mother-in-law in this story immediately gets up and starts "serving" the men, that is, Jesus and his disciples. The poor woman was sick: don't send her back into the kitchen! But I don't feel that way because I remember that so-called "key verse," and how important service to others was in Jesus' ministry. Maybe Simon's mother-in-law just didn't want other people messing with her kitchen; but in serving others, she was following Christ's example whether she realized it or not.

I think she was grateful to be healed and inspired to serve others because she had been served. I think she was overcome by the love Jesus showed and wanted to share the love.

I've been pointing out in the past few weeks that while Mark is sparing with his words, he chooses words that are packed with meaning. Like the various *diakonous* verbs, but also, look at how Jesus, when told about Simon's mother-in-law, came to her, took her by the hand, and lifted her up. Don't you love his care, his gentleness, his connection? The pandemic has changed the way I interact with people as far as touch goes. My oncologist asks me not to have a greeting line at the end of the service where I shake everyone's hand, for example. I miss that touch, that connection with everyone as they leave this holy space; but I'm grateful that I get to press bread into your hands. That's my favorite part of every service: getting to connect with you,

meaningfully. And to bring it back to Deacon Bill for a moment, some of you may not know the story of a time he and I brought communion to a service in a maximum-security prison. As we distributed communion to the incarcerated men attending the service, I noticed that Bill did not release the cup of grape juice in his hand until each man looked Bill in the eye, and then he told them “the blood of Christ, shed for you.”

“I wanted them to look me in the eye, to know that they are loved,” he told me later when I said how moved I had been by this action. Many of them men had not made eye contact prior to this insistence on Bill’s part, and they all smiled at him after looking into his loving eyes. I have learned so much about serving others from our Deacon Bill.

I have found that when visiting anyone during vulnerable times, holding their hand can be powerful. I’m moved by the way Jesus heals with touch. Of course, we have to be careful with touch, as some people do not want to be touched; and others, like me, have to be careful about touch for health reasons. But touch can be powerful.

Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law, and then she served him and others with him. We aren’t healed by God so that we can just serve ourselves. We are healed so that we can serve others. How are you serving others right now? How are you looking in the eyes of people Christ loves and letting them know they are loved, no matter who they are and no matter what they have done?

Today’s passage also tells us something about what we need to do in order to better serve others. Word quickly spread about Simon’s mother-in-law being healed by Jesus, and soon all kinds of people who were sick or possessed gathered around her house so that they, too, could be healed by Jesus. Jesus complied, “and then in the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”

Jesus did not wear himself out serving others. He stopped and went off by himself to seek sustenance from prayer. I hope that we are all doing that here in this place this morning: gathering together to pray, for sustenance, to strengthen ourselves so that we can now go back out into the world to serve others.