

Fifth Weekend After Epiphany (B/RCL): "Saved to Serve"
Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39
February 3-4, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I was with some friends a couple days ago, and the topic of cooking came up. One who recently retired talked about how she'd like to regain her love of cooking. When she was working it was all she could do to get dinner on the table, no less **enjoy** preparing it. She reminisced about her mom, who loved carefully chopping ingredients for salad, and told her daughter that was her special meditation time. I thought of my own struggle sometimes: chop, chop, chopping for coleslaw or colcannon, opening can after can of crushed tomatoes and tomato paste for Italian gravy, or pinto and kidney beans, diced jalapenos, tomato sauce for chili, fighting boredom. Then the Holy Spirit helps me remember and pray St. Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 16:14: "Do **everything** with love." That settles me down, and helps me practice mindfulness: being present and grateful and fully invested in the moment, whatever it is I'm doing, especially if it **could** be rote, but also could become a labor of love through the power of prayer. Repetitive action in the kitchen (or elsewhere) can become like a mantra, a short, repeated prayer focusing us on God's presence in the moment – maybe like a musician practicing scales? Not exciting but the essential foundation for all the excellence that's to come, the fruit of time and practice and inspiration.

In last week's Gospel Jesus cast out an unclean demon in the synagogue on the Sabbath day.

Today's Gospel is the immediate follow-up:

As soon as [Jesus and the disciples] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. (Mark 1:29)

It was like us heading to Grandma's for Sunday dinner. The only fly in the ointment was:

...Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever [The Message translation says, "with a burning fever"; St. Luke says "with a high fever"], and they told [Jesus] about her at once. (Mark 1:30)

We're not talking about a 24 hour bug or even the flu. This passage was read at the August 2012 ELCA Churchwide Assembly I attended in Orlando. It was the kick-off Scripture for the ELCA **Malaria** Campaign which exceeded its three-year goal of \$15 million and to which we contributed. (We have the "thank you" mosquito swatter to prove it!) Peter's mother-in-law could have been on her death bed. There weren't many options for malaria treatment in those days; I'm sure they didn't have quinine pills. The Talmud prescribed a rather unusual cure: tie an iron knife to a thorn bush, using a braid of hair as a rope, and for 3 days quote the verses from Exodus 3 about Moses standing in front of the burning bush (vv. 2-5). I'm not thinking that was too effective medically, but then again, never doubt the power of prayer.

...[T]hey told [Jesus] 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.
(Mark 1:30b-31)

That whole thing about the sick lady popping up from bed and heading to the kitchen to make lunch has made me scratch my head. I didn't **really** think Jesus healed her because He was hungry, but in my mind I'd have liked somebody else to escort her tenderly to the table, offer her a cup of tea and serve **her**. Which is really missing the point, I've learned. In the first century an older woman's dignity was largely grounded in her role as female head of household. Did you notice that Jesus and His disciples left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon **and** Andrew? They were brothers. Simon had a mother-in-law, so obviously he was married. This was the household of an extended, multigenerational family, and apparently Simon Peter's mother-in-law was the female hub of the wheel. Her **joy** was to be "lifted up" to serve. Her attitude was one of gratitude, not servitude.

Jesus had rebuked and banished the alien demonic force that had taken over the poor man in the synagogue that morning, and this afternoon he cures (*rebukes*, says St. Luke – Luke 4:39) the physical fever that had laid low Peter’s mother-in-law. Our *Celebrate* intro says:

*Everywhere Jesus goes, many people expect him to set them free from oppression. Everywhere he goes, he heals them and sets them free. Disease, devils, and death are running for their lives. The forces that diminish human life are rendered powerless by Jesus.*¹

We believe that was true **then**. But do we believe it’s also true **now**? If more people believed that Jesus can set them free from sickness, addiction, sin, despair, there’d certainly be more worshipers in this sanctuary, more than a dozen people at our monthly healing service, more than 5 or 6 people at Intercessory Prayer. I think people believe it theoretically, but not practically. Medicine, surgery, are **tangible**. God **does** use medication, medical procedures, physicians, physical therapists, acupuncturists, etc. as physical channels of divine healing, but Word & Sacrament and prayer are God’s chosen “means of grace.” 12 step groups are powerful communities of healing, which God uses to make broken lives whole. But they aren’t a replacement or a substitute for the community of faith where God also works to mend what’s broken.

Our Lord didn’t cool the fevered brow of Peter’s mother-in-law because He wanted her to pop up and make tuna sandwiches. He doesn’t heal us because He wants something from us; He heals us because He loves us. But the natural response to any Gift Given is a grateful heart. The best way to express our love of God is to love our neighbor, to live a life of faith active in love. Scottish families have a distinctive coat of arms, often accompanied by a motto, a familial creed. One such motto is “**Saved to Serve.**”² In Holy Baptism God saved **us** from sin, death and the devil. **We** are “saved to serve.”

Baptism doesn't protect us from physical or mental illness, from developmental disability, injury or addiction, any more than it prevents us from physically dying. But the Gospel reminds us that when Jesus arrives:

Disease, devils, and death are running for their lives. The forces that diminish human life are rendered powerless by Jesus.

That's true **now** as well as **then**. Let's all take time to reconsider the power of prayer in making broken lives whole. I'm not advocating prayer **instead** of medical, psychological or psychiatric care, or prayer **instead** of group support to get into and remain in recovery from addictions.

"Both and..."

'Which isn't to say we should treat praying to God like writing to Santa. Prayer is **two-way** communication. We need to leave enough silence in our prayer to hear what the Lord might have to say to us. Don't make prayer a one-way street: "God, this is what I have to say today. Ok, got it? Gotta go!" Leave room for God to speak and for the Spirit to dance. Be prayerful. Be open. Be patient. The first lesson from Isaiah ends with the magnificent promise:

*"... those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint."*

Isaiah 40:31

Sometimes the promise is fulfilled in the **next** life, but sometimes it comes true in **this** life – like for the man in the synagogue and for Peter's mother-in-law. She was saved and delighted to serve. May we who are saved be delighted to serve, too. Jesus Christ makes the broken whole. Still.

Now. Amen

¹ *Celebrate* (Augsburg Fortress, Vol. 49, #1), 5th Sunday after Epiphany, February 5, 2012.

²William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Daily Study Bible Series, rev. ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 38.

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