

“Healed to Serve”

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

I have been blessed with good health over the years, but there was one illness that remains memorable: it was when I was stricken with chicken pox in 1988. For most people, chicken pox is an illness that they experience in childhood; but because I am an only child, I didn't have siblings to pass the virus on to me. For adults, chicken pox can be a dangerous disease (I would find out later that it can even be life-threatening). For me, it was two weeks of absolute misery, followed by several weeks of recovering my strength and healing of the scars that were left on my body (I grew a beard which I kept for several years to cover the scarring on my face). While this illness was particularly difficult for me, it was also a challenge for my congregation, since I wasn't able to serve in my pastoral duties which I was in the throws of this disease. When I finally recovered, I could once again serve as God had called me.

Illnesses have both physical and social consequences; they bring great suffering upon us, and prevent us from living our regular lives. They keep us isolated in bed – either at home or in the hospital – keep us away from work, from friends, from social gatherings, and for all that brings us joy and fulfillment in our lives. Suffering and disease are not only difficult for us and for the people that we love, but they are also in direct violation of the will of God. When Jesus came proclaiming that *“the kingdom of God has come near”* (Mark 1:15), he is proclaiming that all that would bring suffering upon us and prevent us from living the abundant lives that are God's will for his people will no longer have the final say in our lives. Jesus' healing ministry is in fulfillment of God's Will, which promises us that the day is surely coming when *“death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”* (Revelation 21:4).

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus acts as a liberation by restoring health, for disease stands in sharp contrast to the Will of God. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus enters the home of his disciples Simon and Andrew, after having left the synagogue in Capernaum where he liberated a man who was possessed by an unclean spirit. As soon as he enters this home, he become aware of another person who is suffering an affliction that has placed her in bondage: *“Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.”* (1:30). This “fever” may have been malaria and could be life-threatening. The severity of the illness is shown by the woman's inability to carryout the demands of hospitality for her honored guest; in the culture of the ancient Middle East, a host was expected to go out of their way to show hospitality to whoever came into their home (an example is when Abraham and Sarah welcome their guests as they are encamped by the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18:1-15). We can imagine how she was feeling as she was laying in her sickbed; not only was the fever bringing her great physical suffering, but knowing that there was an honored guest in her home must have brought her great emotional distress as well, since her illness was preventing her from fulfilling her role as the head of the household.

- Laid low by fever, the woman's strength and life are depleted. Her role and purpose in the community are lost. Her calling and honor, dignity and joy were to share hospitality to guests in her home. This is all gone, as is her self-esteem.” – David Miller.

Jesus' disciples demonstrate the Christian response to troubles when they immediately tell Jesus about the woman's condition, even without knowing what he was going to do (James would offer instructions as to how the church was to respond to those who were sick in their midst: *“They should call upon the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will*

save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up,,,” – James 5:14-15). In response, Jesus *“came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.”* (1:31). Notice that he doesn’t cure her illness from afar, standing in the doorway lest he be infected with her fever. Jesus reaches out and touches her, a personal and consoling touch that conveys comfort and support even as it results in healing: *“then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”* The phrase “lifted her up” literally means “raises her” – a foretaste of the resurrection of the dead that is promised to God’s people through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (*“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”* – 1 Corinthians 15:20). Simon’s mother-in-law is healed not because of her great faith – in fact, there is no mention that she believed at all – but through the gracious act of Jesus Christ, through whom *“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8). She is healed through healing touch of Jesus, who is the *“the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14).

- “We need to be near Jesus to be healed. In fact, some say that’s the very reason for the incarnation – for God to have come to earth in human form. Humans need intimacy – we need to be near each other to help one another to wholeness.” – Linda Fabian Pepe.

This woman is healed because *“disease stands in opposition to God’s goodness and God’s ways”* (Jan Schell Rippentrap); disease has no place in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ who has come *“that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* (John 10:10).

Simon’s mother-in-law is healed so that her fever might not hold her captive; she is liberated from the bondage of her illness so that she might once again live in the manner God intends. That means that she doesn’t get “raised up” so that she can sit and rest; instead, as soon as she is healed *“she began to serve them.”* Her serving is the proper response to what Jesus has done for her, for being a follower of Jesus means that one will be a servant (*diakonia*) as Jesus came to serve others:

- “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for all.” – Mark 10:42-45.

The privilege of showing hospitality to important guests would have been a matter of honor for Peter’s mother-in-law as the senior woman of the household. Her illness had isolated her from her guests and prevented her from fulfilling this role. *“Jesus heals this woman – she is brought to wholeness, to completeness – and she takes her rightful place in service to others.”* (Pepe).

When we pray for healing, we pray that our Lord will both heal us *from* and heal us *for* – heal us from all diseases and impediments that afflict us, hold us in bondage, and prevent us from living fully and abundantly as God intends; and heal us for living our lives in the manner in which God has called us. As Jesus healed this woman from her fever, he healed her for once again being a servant. As Simon’s mother-in-law is healed so that she can once again serve, our Lord offers us healing – as individuals, communities, and congregations – so that we might be raised up for serving in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. *We rise to serve others.*

- “The right response to an experience of Jesus’ healing power is to begin to spend oneself in service to him and his disciples, that is, the Church.” – Mary Healy.

The healing that Jesus offers can take many forms. It can be a healing like that experienced by Simon’s mother-in-law – but we need to be careful that we do not confuse such healing with that offered by false practitioners of so-called “faith healing.” We need to remember that the point of this lesson *“is not that every*

disease is erased from the face of the earth, but that disease stands in opposition to God's goodness and God's ways" (Rippentrap). It can be a healing from emotional distress, from self-doubt, or from feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness that prevent us from seeing ourselves as God sees us and loves us. It can be healing from conflicts and animosities that keep us separate and hostile to others; reconciliation is one of the most profound forms of healing, and God has entrusted to us *"the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."* (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). Christ offers healing to our bodies, our minds, our spirits, our relationships, and our communities so that we might be liberated from the bondage of disease, despair and hopelessness and so that *"daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."* (Small Catechism).

- "The voice that calls us the Beloved is the voice of freedom because it sets us free to love without wanting anything in return. This has nothing to do with self-sacrifice, self-denial, or self-deprecation. But it has everything to do with the abundance of love that has been freely given to me and from which I freely want to give." – Henri Nouwen.

I still bear the scars of my bout with chicken pox, a reminder of a period of great suffering in my life when I was prevented from fulfilling my ordination vows as a minister of Word and Sacrament. When I experienced healing, I realized that no matter how many gifts or talents I may possess it is only through our Lord's strengthening, healing presence that I am able to accomplish God's purpose for my life. I had been healed both from my disease and healed for the sake of serving once again as a pastor of God's people.

As individuals, as family members, as sisters and brothers in Christ, may we continue to place our trust in the *"healer of our every ill [who will] give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow."* (ELW Hymn 612). May we pray that Christ's healing presence and power may dwell among us, so that we might be healed from all that afflicts us and keeps us in bondage so that we might arise as a servant church, *"a caring church that longs to be a partner in Christ's sacrifice, and clothed in Christ's humanity."* (ELW Hymn 729).

- "God of compassion, your Son Jesus Christ, the great physician, made the broken whole and healed the sick. Touch our wounds, relieve our hurts, and restore to us wholeness of life, through the same Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen."