

“The Healing of Peter’s Mother-In-Law”

Mark 1:29-39

2/6/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

This morning, we will have our scripture passage read later in the sermon. But what was it like, in the early church congregations, to hear some of the stories about Jesus? They certainly didn’t have liturgists read out of the New Testament because it was years before Paul and others even wrote the letters (that we call “epistles”) that slowly circulated around in the churches. Paul wrote the oldest of the New Testament writings (Thessalonians) around 50 CE (almost twenty years after Jesus’ resurrection). He later wrote his letters to the Corinthians,¹ the Galatians and finally to the church in Rome. The first gospel wasn’t even written until the mid 60’s CE when Rome was about to crush the Jewish people for their rebellion. So in the earliest churches, for the thirty years after Jesus had departed, there were only a few letters of Paul circulating among the churches to supplement the personal stories people told of their experiences with Jesus.

Perhaps, one morning in the Jerusalem congregation, after a few hymns were sung and an Old Testament passage was read, Peter stood up and told one of his stories about being with Jesus. Perhaps Mark wrote this down as he was talking but as Peter spoke, he was reflecting about an event that had happened some twenty years before. I’ll add extra detail that isn’t in the scripture that reflects the cultural setting with greater vividness. You already know that we’ve got to make these Biblical people and events real or they are just stories without flesh and blood.



I’ll never forget that one Sabbath – it was in November, I believe, just a few weeks after we had gotten to know Jesus. He was teaching in the synagogue school – it was the day He healed the man with the demons – the day everyone was so busy talking about how He had taught with authority, even superior to that of the Rabbis.

¹ Corinthians was written 54-55 CE, Galatians by 56 CE and Romans by 56-57 CE.

Well, . . . I invited Him . . . Andrew had gone on ahead to see Jesus because it was sort of an on-the-spur-of-the-moment thing. When we got home from the synagogue (James and John were along) – I got my wife, Anna, to throw something together to eat, late that day. I brought it in from the kitchen² and we were eating when I mentioned that Anna’s mother was sick in the back room with a high fever.

As soon as I mentioned her, Jesus stopped eating and started to ask about how long she had been ill. We told Him how we had our doctor try the usual cures, . . . you know, the standard one with the knives.

Last week, before this, the doctor brought a knife that was made of pure iron. Next, we got a lock of my mother-in-law’s hair and we used those strands to tie the knife to a branch of a thorn bush in the back field. For three days in a row, we got the doctor to come out to the shrub and repeat the story of Moses and the burning bush – standing in front of the knife tied to the bush – and on the third day, the doctor uttered the special saying. It had worked for our neighbor, down the street, when he had a high fever, but for some reason, it didn’t work for my mother-in-law. The doctor said it was something about the knife not being pure iron.

After I told Jesus about that, He just sort of grinned and got up from the table and asked to see her. The main course wasn’t even on the table and He wanted to see her anyway.

You know, Jesus did a lot of things spontaneously. You know how we keep the women in the back rooms – and like the Rabbis say, we shouldn’t even *allow* them to bring the food out to where we men are. Well, I don’t think I can remember

² In first century Jewish homes, women didn’t eat with the men, even in the homes, and generally lived an existence relegated to the back parts of the household.



even one time when Jesus didn't make some effort to go back to the kitchen where the women folk were cooking and eating by themselves – and sit down and talk.

To tell you the truth, most of us, who have had Jesus to our homes for dinner, usually would change things around afterward. Now we even let the women start bringing our food out to us – being a little more casual than we used to, talking to them instead of having our sons bringing it out from the kitchen. But anyway, back to the story.

Jesus got up from the table and went back to the kitchen and asked my wife where her mother was. We all went back to her room – back in the new addition.

To say the least, my mother-in-law was a little surprised. I was going to tell her Who Jesus was – and how He healed the man with the demon just that day in the synagogue – when all of a sudden I thought to myself: 'Wow, . . . I never even thought to ask Jesus to try to help her out.' All I was thinking about was getting Him here to the house to talk about how phony the Scribes are, or something.'

Well, anyway, . . . my mother-in-law's fever was pretty high then and she was sweating, poor thing, . . . she rolled her head over and looked at Jesus for the first time – as He stood by her bed. He smiled at her and said "Hello" and then He gently took her by the hand, helping her sit up in bed.

I noticed her face had turned from red to a more natural color – as she was sitting there. Then, all of a sudden she talked, for the first time in a week. She said "I think the fever's gone, . . . I'm all right."

Jesus, next, sat down beside her, on the edge of the bed, saying "Why don't you get up and move around a little – you'll probably feel even better." So He helped her up and we all went into the front room.

She was so thankful, almost a little giddy about it, that she immediately went into the kitchen with Anna and started helping with the food. It was amazing – we all sat at the table asking Jesus how He did it. You know, in those days, we often asked Him how He did things but in time, we just stopped doing that because it didn't seem to matter. We all settled down to dinner – Jesus even asked if Anna and her mother could sit down and eat with us. It was a great

afternoon – until shortly after sunset when there was a knock at the door.

I opened the door and the whole town was out there – there must have been about three hundred people. Remember the old rules about traveling on the Sabbath – everyone had to go home from the synagogue after Jesus healed that demoniac, but they waited until evening when the Sabbath was over. Not only were there hundreds of people trying to get into the house to meet Jesus– I could see they brought some of the real sick and poor people from the dangerous part of town – you know, the ones from the other side of the town garbage dump.

Rather than having all those people make a shambles of our house, Jesus went outside and talked there. He started healing a lot of those people. You know, some people were calling Him "the Miracle Worker" or "the Magic Man."

One person, who was demon possessed, was so bad off that he was rolling up against the wall out in front of our house. Jesus told the demon in him not to speak. Later He privately told us that the demon knew Who He really was and He didn't want that demon to spread any news to the crowds about Him being the Son of God. So it was well into the night that people were bringing lamps out of their homes and Jesus, looking pretty tired, still sat there on the long bench by the house, and talked with them.

It wasn't until the wee hours of the morning that Jesus came back into the house and laid down on a couch by the dinner table and fell asleep. James and John slept on the living room floor.

Early in the morning, I guess it was around sunrise, I heard movement in front of the house and thought I'd get up just to see if someone needed anything. Just as I got myself together and came out of the bedroom, I saw Jesus walking out the door and off toward the back field. 'Must be going for a walk' I thought to myself as John, sleepy-eyed, put his head up from his cloak and asked where He was going.

We all had breakfast, . . . Gee, it sure was good to see Anna's mother up and feeling better. You know, before she had the fever, she still insisted on making breakfast despite her arthritis.

There were some knocks at the door and when I opened it, everyone who had come out last night, had returned only there were more. I told them to wait and

I shut the door. I ran out the back door and started looking for Jesus – John and James came along as well.

After a few minutes walk, we finally saw Him sitting on a log about a mile behind the house. He was praying.

“Say Jesus,” I said “looks like another interesting day coming up, . . . there’s about 500 people here this time.

Jesus stood up and said to us, “The reason why I’m here is to tell them about the kingdom of God. If I’m going to reach more, I’ve got to keep moving. We’re going to have to go to a lot of other towns so I can speak there too.

Starting on that day, then, Jesus began to travel all over – I couldn’t go with Him all the time. I had to do some fishing, you know, to pay the bills and eat. But since that day, we saw how Jesus taught in the neighborhood synagogues. He’d talk to anyone in the open market – healing people from demons and diseases. That’s how it all got started – from Capernaum.

From that day on, Jesus brought so much joy and healing to everyone. Sometimes I thought the crowds would press Him to death, but whether He was in the middle of a crowd or even in the privacy of a small house like ours, He was always Himself – and very focused on what He was doing. He never did anything for show because He really cared about each of us.

You know, since that Saturday, when He healed my mother-in-law, she has always set our table with an extra place setting. She says “It’s just in case He comes by for dinner unexpectedly.”

And after Peter finished telling his story, he probably sat down and someone else stood up and shared their reflections or read a scripture passage.

The Scripture is read here.

One of the things that seems to stand out, in this story of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, is how much serving was part of Jesus’ nature. To be a Christian is to be a servant; and perhaps we should notice that there is a vast difference between the kind of serving we usually do and the service Jesus offered. The way most of us serve, I suspect, keeps us in control. We carefully choose when, where and for

whom we will provide help. In that way, we feel as if we are totally in charge.

But Jesus called us to something else. He modeled how we should be true servants. When we make our choice to follow, we give up the right to be so selective about the kind of people with whom we become involved. Jesus calls us to be available to anyone, to become vulnerable and emotionally accessible. In doing so, we end up becoming free of fear. We lose our fear of being stepped on, manipulated or having someone take advantage of us.

As we have often talked in our times together here, it seems obvious to us that there is a lot more going on in our lives than we can immediately see. God has purposes for the people and places in our lives – purposes about which we don’t now know fully.

Obviously we’re not going from place to place with crowds following us. But we can see these pictures of Jesus in dining rooms and back yards – perhaps so that we can be God’s servants in the common places of our lives – in living rooms, locker rooms and school hallways. And who knows, maybe God wants to use you to heal or uplift someone else.

So the question to take home is this: Is our Christianity being carefully parceled out in neat, controlled, scheduled, tax deductible portions? Or are we truly serving others, spontaneously, in the dining rooms and market-places of our lives? ■