

February 4, 2024

Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

“Serving After Your Sickness”

Mark 1:29-39

Peter’s mother was very sick. Mark tells us only that she has a fever, but Luke calls it a “megas” fever, meaning a great fever as opposed to a minor one. Unlike today where a high fever gets one rushed to the local emergency room and most often successfully treated to bring the temperature down, a high fever throughout most of history was a harbinger of death. She was very, very sick.

This makes the miraculous healing of her Jesus performs that much more impressive, and it kind of makes her reaction to the healing kind of weird. She is healed and there is no mention of her rejoicing, praising God, worshiping at Christ’s feet or even thanking Jesus. Both Mark and Luke say that she simply got up and began to serve them. I believe this reaction to a miracle is unique to Peter’s mother in all four Gospels.

But I think this reaction bears pondering because of all that Holy Scripture says about serving, and because we, in our sins, are not always so eager to do so. But Jesus has healed you of death by the forgiveness of sins, and not just earthly death, but the eternal death of separation from God in eternity. Here today we indeed react in rejoicing, praise, worship and thanksgiving as we should and I hope that carries through in your daily life all week long. But serving? That reaction may not be so much on our radar.

In pondering this the first thing we must recognize of course is that serving people is not something the Christ Himself was unwilling to do. Jesus is not a God away and far off. He is God incarnate in our human flesh and His entire ministry, as well as His entire sinless life, was lived in service to others. *“Even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,”* Jesus says of Himself. He served in healing. He served in casting out evil demons. He served in proclaiming the reign of God breaking into human history and teaching the good news of what that means for repentant sinners. Then He served by enduring mockery, injustice, beatings and torture, and ultimately the wrath of God for sin in our place as He died on the cross...in service to you, you personally.

Before going to the cross Jesus made very clear that humble serving of others is part of being His disciple when He washed the feet of the twelve and then said, *“Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.”*

St. Paul in our epistle lesson today kind of punctuates this imperative to serve in saying *“Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”* As an apostle he has that unique calling to which there is no other option than to carry it out. Serving others is admittedly a more ambiguous calling, yet for we who believe there also is not option to avoid carrying it out. St. Peter writes, *“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”* St. Paul in Galatians: *“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”* Jesus Himself says *“The greatest among you shall be your servant.”*

So there is no wiggle room here. We serve because we have been served by God. By serving others we are serving God. Doing so or not doing so reflects our choice in the dichotomy

Joshua put before the people of Israel to serve God or not to which he added, “*But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*”

So...are you serving the Lord? Can you look at your week and point to that place where you serve the Lord?

Some of you might point to the check you put in the offering box. I like those. They pay my salary, keep this facility maintained and support the ministry of the Gospel near and far. But those are tithes and offerings, the returning of the firstfruits of God’s abundant material blessings on your life. That is a mere fragment of what is His due and proper so to do. But it is not serving. Doing is serving.

You may be thinking about serving here at Grace in some way, shape or form. This also is good. I appreciate the Altar Guild, the officers and board, the many volunteers who help with the bulletins, the Pipeliner and simple cleaning and maintenance. We can use some more of that around here for sure. So yeah, consider that, but that’s not really what the point I’m making.

When I ask “Can you point to a place where you served the Lord?” turn that around and think, “Can I point to a place where I served anybody at all?”

A lot of you have jobs where you serve people in your vocation. Many of you have family you serve as caretakers, babysitters, just doing the chores around the house. Even those who are disabled and homebound or in care facilities interact with others throughout the day. In these are you just doing your job? Are you just filling an obligation? Are you just getting through the day? That is absolutely not how it should be for you—the redeemed of Christ!

You stand healed of an eternally deadly sickness! Every morning you awake in the washing of your Holy Baptism you stand brought by Jesus through death to new and everlasting life! The proper reaction is always that of Peter’s mom—grateful service! She got up out of her bed and served Jesus! You do the same!

This does not mean doing some new, glorious, theological church thing. That isn’t what Peter’s mother did. She simply got up and did the regular vocation to which she was called—for Jesus. This is the point I want you to take home. Do you do what you do, the regular and mundane vocations you do...for Jesus? Like intentionally? Consciously? You should. God has placed you there. With faithful gratitude for your salvation go ahead and do that to His glory.

Too often we just fall into a rut. We do things because, well, it’s just life. Not for you! For you every day is life in Christ! Live it that way!

It is not always easy, not always what we’d call happy. Serving others may be, in love, bearing with the shortcomings of a horrible boss, lazy coworker or unreasonable customer. It most certainly means forgiving those who wrong you, who may not “deserve” your forgiveness. It means striving to help those who may not appreciate or acknowledge you—might even treat you horribly. But that’s nothing Christ didn’t bear in His service to you. In fact, He still kinds of bears that in love as He forgives your sins day after day after day, doesn’t He?

Living this way is, in fact, part of running the race of faith St. Paul talks about in the epistle today. Now I know there are those wacky people who really seem to enjoy running long distances, but I don’t think that is how Paul’s metaphor works. Running is hard, grueling work. It is not easy and can be very unpleasant. But we run this race of life in Christ toward the imperishable crown of eternity in Christ’s glory! We run in service to Christ which is reflected in our loving serving of others. It is just the way this race is.

You were very, very sick in your sins, unable to run such a race, dead to God, in fact. Jesus has healed that and now, in grateful response, you serve Him. Set your mind on this race and look forward into your week, those callings in which God has placed you, and aim to

intentionally, actively and thoughtfully serve there the Savior who serves you today forgiveness,
and one day soon, paradise.
Amen.