

B Lectionary 5 2.4.24

Mark 1:29-39

Focus Statement: Jesus empowers us to do our part.

I mentioned last week during the announcements that I wouldn't be at evening Bible chat on Wednesday because St. Phil had a make-up game against Hackett Catholic. I then jokingly remarked that Hackett is D-3, and we are D-4. And Hackett is state ranked, and we are well, not. So, prayers would be appreciated that the game was not too painful.

I won't bury the lead; we did not win. But we did play the absolute best game of basketball we have played all year. This is a team whose been blowing out opponents, and until the end of the game when we had to start fouling to extend the game, we held them to their lowest point total all season. And even with the free throws, this was their third lowest points scored.

And we did this, despite not being able to score much ourselves. We had a short bench, with two girls out sick, both posts, one of our starters and one of our first-off-the-bench post players, we were playing with eight. Against a team known for its post play, which is already our weakest area, we were down two. And our two leading scores, girls we can count on to get hot and knock down shots no matter what, both went cold. They had good looks, but the shots just weren't falling, which happens sometimes. Nothing you can do about it but keep shooting and hope the looks change. We held our own Wednesday night on the defensive end. And defense is a team game. Offense can be individual; you can have one or two girls go off and dominate and everyone else can get away with more or less

standing around doing nothing. But defense isn't like that. With defense everyone has to play together, has to trust each other, has to lock down their girl, and help with mismatches, communicate and work together. Everyone has to work together and everyone has to work hard. If someone quits on a play, the defense will break down. And the girls didn't quit. Even though we were down most of the game, we had girls diving on the ground after loose balls, pushing around much taller opponents for rebounds, hustling, and struggling, and giving full effort every time down the court. Hackett didn't have a single fast break on us all evening, we beat them down the court every single possession. Good defense is about doing your job and trusting your teammates to do that, and the girls did that Wednesday night. This was a pure effort, pure teamwork game.

Why do I share this story with you, other than to brag on my team a little bit and tell you about what I do when I'm not at Trinity? I tell you this, because when I got home Wednesday night, I was reflecting on the game, and I started to think about our Gospel text for this morning. Because there's this weird moment in the text that seems harsh unless we unpack it a little bit. In fact, when I read it in bible chat on Wednesday, a couple of people snorted when they heard the line, because it seems so typical. So, here's the verse again, before I unpack it, and see if you have a similar response. These are verses thirty and thirty-one. "Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and..." And this is the cringe part right here." "...and she began to serve them." And she began to serve them?! You may be saying. This poor woman was literally laying on her deathbed, Jesus brings her back to health, and the first thing she has to do is make her son-

in-law and his buddies some sandwiches? Come on now! Let the woman rest! Before we get too caught up in Jesus and his disciples seeming lack of care for all this woman has been through, let's unpack some of the cultural customs of the time, because there's more going on here that meets the eye.

First century Jewish culture held hospitality in highest regard. The way one treated a guest was a reflection of how one treated God. Hospitality wasn't just about providing food, it was about making someone feel welcome, safe, included in the community. And it wasn't just about showing off how hospitable one was, it was a way of life. Remember, this is the first century, there weren't Holiday Inns or McDonalds or rest areas one could pop into to meet their own needs while traveling. The ability and willingness of a community to provide hospitality could literally be the difference between life and death for the people traveling through it. These are high stakes interactions.

We get this in the word translated as "served." The Greek is *diakoneo*, where we get the English word deacon or diaconate. You've heard Tresa talk about her membership in the Lutheran Diaconal Association, their name comes from this Greek word. We're going to get into some church polity weeds here a little bit, so bear with me. Deacon or Diaconal is the word we use in Lutheran traditions to connote calls to Word and Service. This is different from my call as a pastor, which is to Word and Sacrament ministry. I'm called to preach the word and administer the sacraments. Service is, of course, part of that call, as Christians we are all called to love and serve our neighbor. But my call to service comes mainly through my call to preach the word and preside at the sacraments. Word and Service calls are

focused one service of the neighbor as the means through which grace is shared. The history of the Lutheran Diaconal Association is actually a good way to understand this distinction. The organization was founded in 1919 to provide theological training to women serving primarily as nurses, but also teachers, missionaries, and other helping professions. The idea was to give these women, and they were all women at the time, a theological grounding to approach their work, in the same way that pastors have a theological grounding in our handling of the sacraments. There was this understanding that the skills nurses provide are different than those of pastors—trust me, you do not want me to be your nurse, I have a tendency to be a fainter—and those different skills allowed them to engage in different parts of the good news of the unfolding Kingdom of God. Nurses work is no more or less important than that of clergy, it is simply different. Both, all work really, flow from the understanding of vocation that is given to us at our baptism, to be part of sharing the good news in our own unique ways.

Which gets us back to our Gospel story, and how Simon's mother-in-law was healed and immediately began to serve. The use of this word *diakoneo*, tells us that she wasn't healed in order that she could serve. This wasn't, oh good, you're feeling better, now get us a sandwich. Rather, in being healed, Jesus restored not just her physical health, but restored her to her place in the community, to the work that she loved doing, to her sense of call in the world. Her serving of them is not the result of her healing, it is a sign of the completeness of her healing, a demonstration of how Jesus returned her to not just health but to full participation in the kingdom of God. There's an earlier place in this Gospel where the word *diakoneo* shows up. We haven't read it yet, but we will in two weeks. After

his baptism, when Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, we'll read about how Jesus "was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan and he was with the wild beasts; and..." And here is the key line, "...and the angels waited on him." The word translated as "waited" that's *diakoneo*. We see in this use the expansiveness of hospitality. In serving Jesus and his disciples, Simon's mother-in-law is entering into the work of the angels, showing care and love for God and God's people.

So that's all great, Simon's mother-in-law restored to health and able to participate in the work of the kingdom again. What a gift to her, to those who loved her, and to those she loved. But because this is just one story, one example, there's a piece of reality left out here, which is that healing doesn't always look like this. So here let me tell you one of my favorite stories of another version of healing. I'm sure I've told you this story before, so bear with me if you already know it. At my home church, the church I attended in Washington, DC, there was a member there named Harlan. Harlan was an older man, mid-to-late 80s, I think. Which is young here, I know. And it would have been young for Harlan, except he was struck with a debilitating illness. It almost killed him, and while he'd survived, he would never recover to who he had been before he was sick. Very rapidly he went from very active and healthy, president of the board of one of the church non-profits, active on the property team, volunteering in many ministries, a guy you'd all recognize as one of you, to weak, slow, and reliant on aid. I remember Harlan telling me one day at coffee hour about his illness, and how hard it had been on him to have to give up all the things he loved doing. "I didn't know how to serve God anymore," he told me. "All the ways I used to serve; I couldn't do." But then he told me about what he'd started doing instead. "I realized," he

said, "I couldn't work anymore in the same way, but I could pray. I pray anyway, but I could be more intentional in my prayer." Harlan anointed himself the church's chief pray-er. Every Sunday he would bring home the bulletin with the prayer list on it, and he would pray through every name on that list every morning. "Every morning," he told me, "I get up, I have some cereal, I eat four Bing cherries"—I never figured out what was important about the cherries, but that was part of the story—"I eat four Bing cherries. Then I sit in my chair with my bible, I read my devotional, and I pray through every name on the prayer list. That is my ministry now, that is how I am still able to serve."

Dear people of God, Jesus hasn't saved us to leave us on our own. In baptism we are each given work that is ours and ours alone to do in bringing about the kingdom of God. We, dear people, are co-workers in the Gospel, partners with Jesus in the redeeming work of the world. That work changes throughout our lives, but it never ends. What you have to bring to the world is always important, who you are and who God has created you to be matters. You matter so much in the eyes of God that your gifts are essential to God's work in this world. Thanks be to God who loves us with such trust. Amen.