

“Lifted Up”

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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky

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Today we step right back into a very busy 24 hour period in the early ministry of Jesus. We pick up where we left off last Sunday, with Jesus leaving the synagogue after relieving a man of his demons and teaching those present in a remarkable way. The first disciples, Simon, Andrew, James, and John, have been called from the family business to a new way of life, and have followed Jesus first into the synagogue and now into one of their family homes. Much as the synagogue was at this time the center of religious and community life and the domain of men, the home was the center of family life, which relied on the generational wisdom and labor of women. Simon’s mother-in-law resides in his family home, which tells us that Simon is married and that his mother-in-law is likely a widow. It was common to have multigenerational and even multi-family homes in the Ancient world, a source of mutual support and communal care of children, the elderly, sick and disabled relatives, and travelers in need of shelter.

As Jesus enters into this space of extended family as a visiting traveler, he adds another realm in which the light of the Gospel reaches. The chaos of the Jordan river, the emptiness of the wilderness, the bustling workplace of the fishermen, the carefully maintained atmosphere of the synagogue, and now the hospitality of the home and the anxiety of the sick bed. In just this first chapter of his Gospel, Mark shows us that there is no place in our lives which is meant to remain untouched by the hands of Jesus, and there is no space or person out of reach of Christ’s healing. Immediately upon entering the house, Jesus is informed of the sick woman, lying in bed with a fever, a life-threatening condition with no known cause. Such an ailment would usually signal a

demonic presence or some spiritual affliction, but Mark notably does not attribute the unnamed woman's ailment to spiritual forces. Simon's mother-in-law is simply sick, and the family is worried for her. Jesus goes immediately to the side of the sick woman, takes her by her hand, and lifts her up. Moments ago unable to sit up or stand, this woman clasps the hand of Jesus to steady herself. Only then does the fever leave her.

Restored to health, still in her own domain, the woman begins to serve Jesus and his followers. This may strike us as odd, or even outrageous. This poor woman has just recovered! Has she not earned some rest? Why shouldn't her son-in-law and his young friends tend to their own needs? We might be tempted to chalk it up to good old fashioned gender roles, that she is simply doing what is expected of her, both then and even to an extent today. There are guests in her house, she is a woman, it is her duty to show them hospitality and service.

But let's rewind the track a few moments, look at the scene again with fresh eyes. A strange man, a man whom Simon and Andrew have only just met themselves, has come to the bedside of a woman incapacitated by fever. This stranger reaches down, takes the sick woman's hand, and lifts her out of bed. The word in the Greek that is translated as "lifted up" here is the same word that will be used to describe Jesus's own resurrection, his physical rising from death. She is lifted up, resurrected, and the fever leaves her. What we are witnessing alongside the young disciples is not a mere healing in the clinical sense. Simon's mother-in-law is restored to wholeness, to a fullness of life that is somehow better than before. She does not need time to rest and recover from her illness, because she has been made new. What is the immediate response to this kind of encounter with salvation? *Diakonos*. Service. The word which gives us the order of deacons. Simon's mother-in-law is raised up by the hand of Jesus, and becomes a deacon.

In three sentences, not even three full lines of text, with no name given and no further mention made, this woman teaches us more about discipleship than her blessed son-in-law manages in a millennia. Dear Simon is already missing the point, hunting for Jesus in all the wrong places only to disrupt his prayer and demand of him a transactional ministry, a ministry of healing that is divorced from the ministry of preaching and teaching that grants context to suffering and hope to those still waiting to be made whole. But this one woman who has been lifted up receives her healing the way Jesus himself will teach his disciples to receive it. Jesus must repeat his message of servanthood and self-emptying love over and over again to his foolish apprentices. But, with the wisdom of a lifetime of motherhood and prayer shining behind her eyes, the woman who has been healed responds with faithful service to her Lord and Savior, including serving and supporting his disciples in their journey. Her home becomes a haven of rest and restoration, one stop on Jesus's journey from the riverbank to the resurrection. Unlike his disciples who would demand of Jesus more and more miracles, this faithful deacon gives of what she has, until it is time to bid her healer farewell. Would that we could all show one glimmer of the same depth of gratitude.

For we are all, always and especially in moments of particular turmoil, in need of being lifted up. We are all at times the one in the fever bed, sick with grief or with rage or with pride or with loneliness. In these moments we can only rely on the intercession of others, of those we know and love and of those we may never meet, those who pray, who beg Jesus to come to our bedside. This is why we pray, and why we give others the opportunity to pray for us in our vulnerability. Because there are times when we are unable even to lift our hand to reach for faith, too weak to pray or too afraid to acknowledge the depth of our need. Our faith family, our fellow disciples, by their ministry of prayer and of care to us bring us strength to take the hand when it

is offered, help us to steady ourselves when we are raised up to wholeness. Perhaps we might be tempted to congratulate ourselves for finding that strength, or perhaps we can feel gratitude for the prayers of others without it ever occurring to us to offer our own. But our faithful ancestor, our spiritual mother, reminds us of another way, a better reflex when restoration is our inheritance. Simon's mother-in-law was given new life and with it she began to serve. Diakonos. Deacons. Servants of God. Serve one another, steadied in the strength that you have been made new by the one whose seal is upon your forehead and whose image is upon your heart. This is your message. Proclaim it with your life.