

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Amen.

Our reading this week from the Gospel of Mark shows us the aftermath of Jesus healing the man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue at Capernaum. The four disciples that Jesus drew from their fishing boats in the Sea of Galilee, Peter and Andrew, James and John, go to Peter's home. After what they've just witnessed in Capernaum's synagogue, it makes sense that they tell Jesus about Peter's mother-in-law who was ill with a fever. Jesus has shown his great gift of healing to a man in the synagogue; they take the opportunity to bring that gift to one in their own home.

For many who have read this passage, it brings up jokes and somewhat sarcastic comments about the gender dynamics going on. First century Galilee is, after all, a patriarchal society; so when Jesus enters the house and heals Peter's mother-in-law and she immediately rises and begins to serve the men, eyebrows are raised and eyes are rolled in a modern audience. We picture a sick woman being made well only to find herself

trapped in the subservient role of waiting on the men at the table. But I think a modern audience can also see something else in this encounter between Jesus and Peter's mother-in-law.

Earlier in this first chapter of Mark, we saw Jesus out in the desert wilderness facing temptation; the Gospel tells us that he was ministered to by angels. That verb translated as "minister" is the same used here that has been translated as "serve". In other words, Peter's mother-in-law, once she was healed, rose from her sick-bed and *ministered* to Jesus. I think we can look at this encounter as an *exchange*, rather than as a lowly woman being put back in her place. These are two human beings in ministry, in an exchange of care for one another; and their actions are holy work.

When Jesus healed the man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue, Jesus recognized a need that perhaps no one else even saw; Jesus recognized the need and met it with the healing he was able to provide. When Peter's mother-in-law is healed, she too recognizes a need in Jesus. He has just grabbed the attention of everyone in the town; soon, a crowd will gather and will do just what Peter and Andrew, James and John have done, and bring to Jesus all who are unwell. He needs a respite, however

brief; and he needs to be fortified for the task ahead. So Peter's mother-in-law ministers to him, meeting his need as best as she is able with what she has.

Our modern reading of this passage can lament the strictures and constraints that society has placed on Peter's mother-in-law: the fact that she is limited to her household role, and that her actions center around serving the men. But we can also see this woman doing ministry to the fullest extent that she can in that moment with what she has; and as slight as that may seem, it is the same as the ministry of angels.

At this point in the Gospel, we are still at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry; but at the end of his encounter with Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus now also has someone else who is actively living out that ministry. This unnamed woman is recognizing need and meeting it to the best of her ability and circumstance; and as Jesus' ministry unfolds, we will see that she is in fact a forerunner of the others who will take up the work of the Jesus movement. By the time Jesus reaches the cross, there are more women around him; they are no longer nameless; the Gospel writers will let us know of Mary Magdalene and Salome; and they are called in Mark's

Gospel *disciples*; they are no longer only defined by marriage and household. The ministry that Peter's mother-in-law begins in her own way will expand among the women who come to follow Jesus.

We often fail to notice or value the small, individual exchanges that lead to revolutionary moments. The revolutionary moments, after all, are often spectacular and widely broadcast, like Jesus' healing of the man in the synagogue. But it is small interactions building one on top of the other, the many seemingly unremarkable, intimate exchanges between individuals that often lead to the big moments. The healing in the synagogue was the result of a series of small and faithful acts: the disciples deciding that Jesus was worth a little more of their time, energy, and attention than fishing; the leaders of the synagogue deciding to invite Jesus to teach; the man with the unclean spirit showing up despite the inner turmoil he may have felt.

Peter's mother-in-law begins by ministering to Jesus in the only way she can; but later, women will be supporting Jesus' ministry throughout Judea; women will be the first to proclaim the Good News of the resurrection; and when the apostle Paul is labouring in the early church, he will call the

women in whose houses the believers meet his co-workers and even fellow apostles - those sent - in Christ.

“Everyone is searching for you,” Simon and his friends tell Jesus.

Especially now in our time, many are searching for the kind of exchange of healing, and of ministry that we see between Jesus and Peter’s mother-in-law. Many are searching for those who have the eyes of their heart open to see their need, and whose hands are ready to meet that need to the best of their ability. Most of the time that ministry will not grab headlines and lead a crowd to your door; most of the time that ministry is another small step leading to a larger victory. So do not discount or undervalue the seemingly small exchanges of care, of listening, and of ministry we share with those we encounter. Seek them out, search for them with all your heart; look inward and grow the gifts God has given you so that you are able to do the best you can with what you have. Meeting the spiritual and physical needs of one another is holy work; and it is on the foundation of these faithful, individual exchanges that the kingdom is built. Amen.