

*“When Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 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 she began to serve them.”*

Probably every woman hearing today’s gospel can relate to this passage. How many of us have hauled our butts out of bed to tend to the needs of others when we were ill - whether it was spouse or partner, child or anyone in need of care. We did it out of a sense of love or duty, out of grace and out of resentment, out of obligation and frustration and compassion and the knowledge that there was no one else to do what needed to be done.

So how are we to respond to this passage?

With resignation, with anger that even Jesus who treated so many of his female followers as equals, even Jesus expects us to get out of bed when we are sick to feed him, and with a roll of the eyes and shrug of the shoulders acknowledging that this is business as usual?

However you hear it, however you react to it, this is one of those passages that requires a bit of context to be understood correctly and understood in a way that doesn’t necessarily offend our modern sensibilities or condemn us to life in the status quo.

Peter is bringing his new buddies home to supper, supper that the women in his household would have prepared and served, would have set up to honor the master of the house’s guests.

Women were in charge of the household in the ancient world. Although domestic life is not fulfilling for all women this interior family space was reserved for them to oversee and make habitable in their own way. One of the commentaries has pointed out that as the matriarch of the family it would have been the privilege of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law to welcome his guests and to preside over the hospitality that was offered to his them. The matriarch would be honored for the hospitality that she provided in honor of Simon Peter and his guests.

If we can accept that this was an honored role perhaps we can go a bit farther and explore what Jesus was actually doing when he healed her.

Remember that Mark compresses his stories by moving from one episode to the next in almost every sentence -- and I will admit that it does read as if Jesus healed Simon Peter’s mother-in-law just so that they could get a square meal but that it’s more complex than that.

Simon Peter and the other disciples told Jesus that Simon Peter’s mother-in-law was sick. They were probably worried about her; they might have even brought Jesus back to the house so that he could heal her. But even more than this Jesus’ healing accomplishes something else. Healing is never about just curing an illness. I imagine that when Jesus heals someone after an illness they didn’t need time to recover. Think about it, when most of us have been really sick and had the flu, for example, once we have taken a turn for the better it usually takes a few days or even a few weeks to recover. Not so with Jesus’ healing; being healed seems to mean being back into tip-top shape and raring to go. Therefore Simon Peter’s mother-in-law was probably not scattering Kleenex in her wake, or still coughing up a storm, or

displaying any signs of recovery that are normal for human beings who are in the process of “getting better”. Simon Peter’s mother-in-law was up and at-’em to do her best Martha Stewart impression.

Nevertheless what is even more important than being physically healed is that the healing restored Simon Peter’s mother-in-law to her rightful place as the female head of the family. Her role, her identity, her value was now intact. And this is the most important part of what Jesus does in his healing. Those whom he heals are brought back to life in community.

Think about the story of unclean spirit whom Jesus had healed just a few verses previously. That man was living a very difficult life until Jesus cast out the spirit. We get more details of this kind of life when Mark describes the healing of the Gerasene demoniac who was living among the tombs and had to be restrained with shackles but it is enough to know that Jesus’ healing involves restoration... much like his arrival and proclamation of the kingdom of God is the beginning of the restoration of all creation.

Now we can see how understanding context can put a positive spin on the healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law.

Jesus came to restore creation, to reconcile us to God and each other, to enable us to live fully as God intended. We each of us are initiated into that restored existence in baptism when we are buried with Christ in his death, when by it we share in his resurrection, and when through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.

So yes, we are restored but what are we supposed to do?

Our reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians provides us a clue. *“If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel.”* In regular people speak Paul is saying that having heard the gospel he is bound to proclaim the gospel, that is his charism, his gift as an apostle and that therefore he is obliged to use that gift. Most of us have not been given the gifts to found new churches, to beat them into shape, and to go to our deaths so focused on the call to serve Christ that nothing else matters. But each Sunday we hear the word of God, we are nourished by his body and blood, and we are sent into the world in peace to love and serve him with gladness and singleness of heart. In other words, just like Paul we are sent out into the world we are to take the gospel with us.

We are called to take the gospel with us using whatever gifts we have been given and whatever work we do, at home, in the community, or in our workplace. Wherever we find ourselves we are to take the gospel with us, we are to be the good news in the world. Like Simon Paul’s mother-in-law we have been restored to a life of service. In reality service is at the core of everything we do whether we are building or repairing, selling or advising, parenting, care-taking, nursing, coaching, teaching or training, providing music or art, delivering, serving, cleaning cooking, leading, waiting tables, book-keeping, guarding or any other activities that are a part of our daily lives. These are all acts of self-offering. Therefore we can think of almost everything we do as our way of living out the gospel. This is holy work of holy people - if we choose to look at it that way. Some days I know that takes some doing but that choice is up to us. By in large Episcopalians are not a people who go door-to door telling people about the

good news. We might not even let people know that we go to church or that God is an important part of our lives but in our work, although I wish we would but the impact of the good news shows up in what we do - as Jesus said to his disciples in the gospel of John "*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (Joh 13:35 NRS) This is not about being nice, although helps, it is about being the face of Christ in the lives that we live in response to the gift that we have received in baptism.

Bottom line, there is meaning in all the work we do if we see it as a way of proclaiming the gospel. And when we do, we will, like Paul, understand that by proclaiming the gospel we share in its blessings.

Amen.