

Following Jesus
James 1:17-21 and Matthew 8:14-22
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
FPC, Columbus, IN

We find our gospel reading for this morning in the Women's Lectionary, but it is not in either the Revised Common Lectionary, or the Narrative Lectionary. And that should tell us something about what is of key importance in this passage, right off the bat. Shouldn't it?

Since Wilda Gafney, the author and compiler of the Women's Lectionary, selected this scripture to highlight for today when other lectionary compilers have left it out of their entire three- or four-year cycle, I'm thinking she has something she wants to call our attention to that involves a woman or women. Isn't that what you're thinking, too?

Indeed, a woman does figure prominently in this text. Peter's mother-in-law has a fever when Jesus arrives at their shared home. In those days, a fever was considered an illness, in and of itself, not merely a symptom that points to an illness. Jesus touches her hand and she is healed. I really wish Jesus still made house calls because I'd love to load Felipe's address into Jesus' GPS and send him right over there!

As soon as the woman is healed by Jesus, she gets up and begins to "serve" him.

Now I've read a lot of commentaries and sermons on this scripture passage and many of them just gloss over these two verses about Peter's mother-in-law. They prefer, instead, to feature the poetic way Jesus says he is essentially homeless in verse 20: "Foxes have dens and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Woman has no where to lay his head."

Or, they focus on the shock value of verse 22 when Jesus tells a disciple who wants to bury his father "let the dead bury their dead." Wow! That feels so uncaring and abrupt. Doesn't Jesus understand our family obligations?

But on the rare occasion that other preachers focus on verses 14 and 15 – the two verses that tell us of Peter's mother-in-law's healing, and her immediately getting up and serving him – they focus on the gift of hospitality. They tell us Peter's unnamed mother-in-law is an example to us all. We should all practice good hospitality.

That's not necessarily a bad idea. But it isn't the point of this text.

The Greek word that is translated as "serve" in this text is *diakonia*. This same word, elsewhere in the Bible, is translated as "ministered to." Earlier in Matthew's gospel – chapter 4, verse 11 – we hear of the *diakonia* of the angels, who ministered to Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus had just rebuffed the tempter's third challenge and ordered him away. In the last verse of the temptation scene, the adversary departs, and Jesus is serviced by the angels. Depending on your translation, the angels "waited on him," "took care of him," or "took care of his needs." They, indeed, ministered to him.

This word *diakonia* is found again, later in Matthew's gospel, at the foot of Jesus' cross. In chapter 27, verse 55 we read: "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him." Again, other translations tell us the women "served" him or "ministered" to him.

Diakonia, you may have guessed, is where we derive our word "deacon." The Presbyterian Book of Order calls ordained deacons to a ministry of:

compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress. Persons of spiritual character, honest repute, exemplary lives, brotherly and sisterly love, sincere compassion, and sound judgment should be chosen for this ministry. (G-2.0201).

Friends, this is no small order. This kind of ministry goes way beyond polite hospitality. This is "serving" on a whole different level. This is "taking care of someone's needs" on a whole different ball field. This...is ministry.

One Presbyterian church in Michigan describes the role of deacon this way, on their website (FPC, Ann Arbor):
Deacons are the "servants" or "caregivers" of the congregation. ...People have all kinds of needs - they are recovering from surgery, grieving, lonely, ill, or otherwise in a time where they welcome the ministry of care from our congregation. In a very real way, Deacons are the hands and heart of the Church in our ministry of caring.

Peter's mother-in-law – a woman whose name is lost to us – is a prototypical "early adopter." No, she didn't wait in line for the next technological tool to be released from a certain well-known manufacturer. Instead, she experienced healing and her immediate response is to jump with both feet into ministry – a ministry of service and care – without stopping to consider the cost or the consequences.

By comparison, the disciple in verse 21 wants first – before following Jesus – to bury his father. Simply put, Wilda Gafney says, Peter's mother-in-law "turns toward Jesus and Jesus's male pupil turns away" (p. 53).

Time and again, throughout the Biblical text, women have been leaders, ministers, elders, and deacons. Women served in some very prominent ways in the early church, bringing folks into a closer relationship with God, demonstrating to others how to follow Christ. And time and again, they get glossed over, they remain unnamed, and tradition diminishes their importance through the centuries.

I had the good fortune to be in attendance at last year's Wild Goose Festival in North Carolina – where, incidentally, I frequently get to rub elbows with Ann Jones (a regular attender of the festival). At the closing worship service, Diana Butler Bass preached a sermon entitled "All the Marys" that demonstrated how women in the early church have been deliberately and systematically relegated to the margins of church history when, in fact, they played key, important roles in the infancy of the church. I commend to you her sermon, which can be found on YouTube.

Women were a key part of Jesus’ ministry and the formation of the early church. Women have been prominent church leaders from the beginning. It is criminal how we have reduced or erased women from the story of Jesus and his ministry.

But we are not going to allow that to continue. We will do our best to include stories of women in the story of faith. To practice this, I’d like to invite you to swap stories with your neighbor about women of faith who have impacted you on your spiritual journey. Scoot a little closer to someone sitting nearby your pew in the sanctuary, or your couch at home. Share a story of a woman – or several women – who ministered to you.

You’ll have five minutes for this time of sharing. I will indicate when it is time for the other person to share.

I encourage you to write a note of gratitude for the women that have impacted your faith journey in a positive way. If they are still living, send it their way. They will be so touched to hear from you! If they are no longer with us, it’s okay. You can still write the thank you note. It may stir up some special memories and feelings in you. I hope and pray you are inspired by these women to minister to others in their honor, their memory, and in the glory of God.

Let us pray:

Loving God, we give you thanks for all the women who led, challenged, nurtured, prophesied, and ministered to countless disciples along the way. Grant us the wisdom and the courage to follow in their footsteps. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. Share a story of a woman – or several women – who ministered to you. As you take turns sharing, what are your observations? Are there any similarities or patterns you notice?
2. Did Jesus have any expectations of Peter’s mother-in-law when he healed her of her fever? Of the “many” who were demon-possessed? Of the religious scholar? Of the other disciple? Of us?
3. What has the story of Peter’s mother-in-law inspired you to do?