

Christ's Priorities

Mark 1:29-39 CEB After leaving the synagogue, Jesus, James, and John went home with Simon and Andrew. ³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was in bed, sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. ³¹ He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she served them. ³² That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered near the door. ³⁴ He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn't let the demons speak, because they recognized him. ³⁵ Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. ³⁶ Simon and those with him tracked him down. ³⁷ When they found him, they told him, "Everyone's looking for you!" ³⁸ He replied, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come." ³⁹ He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons.

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In the verses just before our text this morning, Jesus was teaching in the Synagogue when he was interrupted by a mentally deranged man. Jesus commands the man's demon to leave him and the crowd at worship that day are amazed! Today's gospel lesson begins when Jesus leaves the Sabbath service at the synagogue and heads home with Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. Two other disciples, the brothers James and John, also come along. When they get to the house, Jesus is told that Peter's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. The first thing that some people notice is Peter has a mother-in-law. As Martin Luther remarked one time in a debate about priests and celibacy, "Peter had a mother-in-law, and, therefore, had a wife too." As a child, I often heard about Peter's marriage in sermons that denigrated Roman Catholics, priestly celibacy, and the concept that Peter was the first Pope. The text certainly illustrates that being married was no hindrance in being called by Jesus to be a disciple. What many people don't know is that the church didn't require priests to be celibate until centuries later.

Context is important in understanding scripture. We take aspirin and antibiotics for granted, but this takes place long before they were available. A fever was serious. It was an indication of a serious condition. There was nothing to lower the fever and nothing but one's white cells to fight the cause of the fever. It was so serious that fever was attributed to demonic forces. Jesus simply goes to the woman, takes her hand, helps her up, and her fever goes away immediately. There are several things that are not present in this event. There's no indication that her condition is punishment for some sin. Jesus (like Job) rejects the tendency to think of sickness as God's punishment for sin. Her faith isn't mentioned or questioned. Prayer isn't part of the healing process.

There's a vast difference today. Someone with a serious medical condition is likely to ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" as if it is punishment for offending God. Faith healer evangelists are quick to declare that faith is required and lack of healing comes from lack of faith. Prayer and even speaking in tongues are often part of the ritual today, but they're absent from this and other accounts in scripture.

In any event, the fever leaves the woman and she gets up and serves them. At this point in the story, people let their own viewpoint color how they see this story. There are women who are quick to point out that Simon's mother-in-law was healed in time to serve supper. It seems like sexist timing that keeps a woman in her place – catering to the needs of men by carrying out her traditional subservient role.

Male commentators on this passage race forward to color their interpretation far differently. The passage says that she got up and served them. The word translated as “served” is *diekonei*, and it’s where we get the word *deacon*. In many English translations of the New Testament, the noun form of the Greek word is usually translated as *deacon* for men and *servant* for women. That, of course is an indicator of the sexist bias of many translators before the last few decades, because only men were deacons, and women were expected to serve, but not hold office. But some modern commentators say Simon’s mother-in-law was *diekonei* so she was the first deacon. She’s a disciple who quietly demonstrates the high honor of service to the messiah. Since we aren’t told that this is her motivation, it seems rather speculative.

There is a third and less biased way to read this text. Context is important. In that day and time a woman did have a few rights and occasions of authority. A first-century Jewish matriarch would have been ashamed not to be in charge when guests came to her home. And she may have enjoyed what authority was available to her in a patriarchal society. Suddenly feeling whole and well, it would seem only reasonable that the combination of gratitude and her cultural responsibility for hospitality would mean that she’d serve her guests and family.

Because of their culture, the disciples and men in general would have a hard time seeing serving others as desirable. Later, Jesus will correct them by teaching, ^{CEB} **Mark 10:43** “But that’s not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant.” In our culture, neither men nor women aspire to be servants, and that Christian virtue is under appreciated and less cultivated than it should be. Jesus, however, has served the needs of others willingly. A man with a demon in the synagogue. A woman with a fever at home. Jesus heals all sorts of illness in all kinds of places to all sorts of people. And it continues. After sundown, when the Sabbath was over, those who were sick and those possessed with a demon (two different categories) came to Simon’s house. There’s some literary exaggeration here, some hyperbole. It says that the whole city was gathered around the door. It seems unlikely that every man, woman, and child in Capernaum was either sick or deranged.

Jesus healed many people with all kinds of diseases. And he released other from the demons that twisted their lives. Here again, returning people to wholeness doesn’t seem to depend on their faith. Healings are more about the compassionate character of the healer than the faith of the healed. So, I repeat: A man with a demon in the synagogue. A woman with a fever at home. Now, a crowd in the street. Jesus heals all sorts of illness in all kinds of places to all sorts of people.

Then, sometime during the night well before dawn, Jesus stole away to a deserted place to pray. The way Mark tells the story, Jesus has had a very busy day. As soon as one thing happened during the day, Mark says that Jesus went immediately to the next thing that happened. The overall impression that Mark leaves is one of a very hectic day of teaching and healing a lot of people. And all through the gospels, we find evidence of the humanity of Jesus. In times of stress, temptation, and decision he turns to God for strength and guidance. He seeks solitude and prays.

Apparently, during the night, or perhaps early in the morning, another crowd gathers, wanting to see Jesus. When the crowd shows up, Peter, Andrew, James, and John search for Jesus. The original language here has the tone of urgency, of a bit of desperation. The disciples pursued, searched eagerly, hunted for him. It’s as if Peter comes to restore Jesus to his senses. Jesus has gone off for some solitude to pray and

they've hunted him down and interrupted his meditation. It's not a scene where the disciples show much consideration for their rabbi.

They tell Jesus, "Everybody's looking for you!" If we were in Jesus' position, we'd likely be tempted to return with Simon to curry the crowd's favor with more miracles. We could build on the success of the day before. But these four disciples misunderstand Jesus' priorities. Mark's gospel notes that the disciples frequently misunderstand Jesus. One wag suggested that in Mark, the disciples are often "duh- ciples."

Rather than going back to Capernaum, Jesus says, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come." Teaching about how to live in God's kingdom is Christ's priority. And that's what he did. The next verse says, "39 He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons." Jesus went from place to place, spreading the good news that God's beloved community was in the process of arriving, that it was within them, and that God would bring it to complete fulfillment. God's kingdom is here, it is arriving, and it will arrive. The healings that Jesus does are always secondary, subordinate to and supportive of his mission of preaching the in-breaking Kingdom of God. However, Jesus doesn't just tell the people about God's love, he lives that love in his many compassionate actions. We call Jesus Emmanuel, God-with-us, because we experience God's love in Jesus' way of life. And so we speak of the incarnation, God in human flesh.

And yet, we can hardly wrap our minds around this concept. When we stop being so totally focused on the miracles, we begin to see the humanity of Jesus. After all, Jesus prays. Divine beings don't pray. Jesus eats and sleeps and gets tired – all very human characteristics. Mark juxtaposes Jesus as tired human and powerful Son of God. Jesus is not less divine for also being human. Karl Barth noted that false gods are a reflection of human pride which will not bend. "God shows Himself to be the great and true God in the fact that He can and will let His grace bear the cost, that He is capable and willing and ready for this condescension, this act of extravagance . . . What marks out God above all false gods is that they are not capable and ready for this. God is not proud. In His high majesty He is humble." The primary characteristic of God isn't power or transcendence; God is love. And Christ shows that love so well, so fully. We proclaim that in the Scots Confession when we declare that Jesus "is the very Messiah promised, whom we confess and acknowledge to be *Emmanuel*, true God and true man, two perfect natures united and joined in one person."

While you and I are created in God's image, we know that we are not a perfect reflection of our creator. Still, our humanity is no excuse for not trying to emulate the example that our savior provided for us. There are several ways that we can do that. Jesus challenged us to love one another as he loved us. That challenge, that goal is always before us and we must not lose sight of it. We can always strive to love more and to love more perfectly.

In this story in Mark, we also see the rhythm of work, rest, and prayer. Jesus is extremely busy -- but never rushed, never too busy to deal with situations as they arise, never too busy to heal, to take time to pray, and to go. It is so easy to lose that balance in life. We can fill our life with busyness, but busyness that has little value and little meaning. Or we can focus on work to the point that love is squeezed out of our life, rest leaves and exhaustion enters, and prayer is only gasped in traumatic moments. We can fall into the habit of encapsulating our time in worship on Sunday morning, wrapping it up tightly and sealing it so that it has little effect on the rest of our week. Our love can be reduced to a

perfunctory “have a nice day.” The example that Jesus lived challenges us to live life fully aware, and open to the people and possibilities of every moment. Jesus came so that we might have life and have it abundantly. It’s up to us to wake up and live that way. Amen.

Live life abundantly,
Filled with love
Balancing work, rest, and prayer.