

Just a decade before Jesus began his public ministry there was a Roman-Jewish war that left many in Palestine, especially in the rural areas, confronting disease and physical disabilities. Most of us here have never experienced war first-hand, even in far-off lands. But as those who have traveled to El Salvador or Rwanda or Liberia can tell you, the casualties of war extend way beyond the battlefield. War creates poverty and disease and famine, and it takes a long time to recover from that, because when you get rid of the infrastructure of a country and there are no roads or clean water and the food supply is limited and there is no basic healthcare you are left with chaos—often for decades and even longer. You don't have to be an economist to know that for the poor in our own nation and around the world, illness equals unemployment. If you don't work you don't get paid. So the cycle of poverty spins viciously downward. How do you begin to change that?

Jesus does it by healing people. As we continue in the weeks and months ahead to read through Mark's Gospel it is striking how many healing stories there are; this is the context, I think, for interpreting those stories. Jesus restores people in a war-torn land to dignity and as he heals the physical bodies of men and women and children, he is also beginning to heal the Body Politic and building the City of God.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That is how Mark's gospel opens: Jesus' public ministry marks a new beginning, a new era not just for first-century Jews but for the world. Mark doesn't tell us about Jesus' birth or childhood: for him this new beginning takes place in the Judean wilderness. There we are first introduced to John the Baptizer, who is quoting from the prophet Isaiah. (In fact it's the very same chapter that we heard in today's Old Testament reading.) John is out there in the desert preparing the way of the Lord and reminding people of the prophets of old, of Isaiah and Elijah and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

"In those days," Mark tells us, "Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." As he comes out of the water, he is identified as God's own beloved, and then immediately he is driven into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. There the angels *minister to him*. (Remember that little detail because it will be on the quiz coming later in this sermon.)

Just after John the Baptist is arrested. Jesus comes to Galilee to proclaim the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Two weeks ago we heard this reading, about how Jesus passed by the Sea of Galilee and called two sets of brothers to follow him: Simon and Andrew and the Zebedee boys. He tells these four fishermen that he is going to teach them to fish for people.

Last weekend, we picked up where we had previously left off, still in the first chapter of Mark. Jesus and his disciples go to Capernaum. There, on the Sabbath, he enters the synagogue to teach, not as the scribes, but as one having authority. He silences an unclean spirit and calls it out from a man, which leaves everyone totally amazed. Word spreads quickly in a small town like Galilee when something like that happens.

In today's Gospel reading, we're still just in that first action-packed chapter of Mark. A great deal has already happened: baptism at the Jordan, announcing that the time is at hand, the calling

of the first four disciples, preaching in the synagogue, silencing an unclean spirit. As one commentator puts it, *Jesus has announced a new Way of being in the world and he is now in the process of summoning others to follow him and join him in that Way.**

So Jesus leaves that synagogue at Capernaum. It's still the Sabbath as he enters the house of Simon Peter and Andrew, with James and John, those first two sets of disciples he had called just a few verses earlier by the Sea of Galilee. Simon Peter's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever and they tell Jesus about her at once. Jesus takes her by the hand. In doing so he violates two religious norms at once.

First of all, it's still the Sabbath day. Even if this is in the privacy of Peter's home, some purists would insist that in healing this woman, Jesus is doing work on the Sabbath. Later in his ministry, when he's confronted about doing this same thing publicly, he'll defend his actions by saying "the Sabbath is made for people, not people for the Sabbath." It's a matter of interpretation, however, and most of the religious authorities would be upset with him for not waiting a few hours until the sun goes down and the Sabbath is over.

Second, Jesus touches this woman. Since she is not his wife or sister or mother, this is another cultural taboo. First-century Middle Eastern men are not supposed to touch first-century Middle Eastern women to whom they are not related. Mark is putting us on notice that Jesus is willing to push the buttons of the keepers of the religious status quo. And what he does here in private will soon become a public expression of his ministry, which will bring him into conflict with those who don't like boats rocked.

The fever leaves this woman and now: remember how I said there would be a quiz later in this sermon? *She began to serve them.* In English that sounds kind of sexist, like Jesus and his friends are lazy men who can't cook their own supper, so Jesus does a little magic and heals Peter's mother-in-law because they are hungry.

But the Greek verb here is exactly the same word that Mark used just eighteen verses earlier. Remember? It was used to describe what the angels did for Jesus in the wilderness when he was being tempted by Satan for forty days. It's the Greek root word *diakoneo*, from which our word "deacon" is derived. Mark is suggesting that Peter's mother-in-law is like an angel! That she is a deacon! This verb goes to the very heart of who Jesus is and what he is about. In the ninth chapter of Mark he is trying to get these male disciples to recognize that the whole point is for them and all who mean to take up their cross and join in this Way is to be like deacons, to be servant ministers. It will take them much longer to get it than it takes Peter's mother-in-law.

There's more: when Jesus "lifts her up"—that's how we heard it in the NRSV today—it could just as easily be translated, "he *raised* her up." It's the same verb we'll see again in a few months on Easter morning to describe what God does to Jesus in the resurrection. This little healing story, in other words, is an Easter story. Already in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, this woman shows us what discipleship is about and that Jesus is about is Easter and that his followers are called to be Easter people. She got it that the Paschal mystery requires a response from her; so she accepts his call to share with him in the work that he is in the world to do. Jesus has announced the beginning of this new Way of being in the world and is summoning people to

join him in this work, and she says “here I am!” Henri Nouwen wrote a book years ago called *The Wounded Healer*. She is a wounded healer.

By getting up and ministering to him she shows that she is light years ahead of her son-in law and his pals whom it will take until Pentecost to figure this out! So who knows, maybe she does cook up some lentils and make some hummus, but if she does that it’s not because she *had* to. It’s not because of social convention. Social conventions are being turned upside down here so it would be ridiculous to make the story a defense of the status quo. If she does make supper it’s only because she has accepted the call to share in the very same work that Jesus does when on the last night of his life he washes his friends’ feet and feeds them: she is responding to the love of God as an equal participant in this new household of God, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free.

We see in today’s reading that Jesus is about to take this message public. He is about to head out into this first-century Palestinian context to ask still others to join him in this work. Eight more will be called to join that inner circle but countless others will accept the call to be his followers and join him in this new Way. After his death and resurrection they will continue that work and invite still others to join them, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This work is still the same for us because we are somewhere still in the midst of it all. If Mark 1 is the beginning of the good news, we still remain a long ways from Revelation 21:4—when every tear is wiped from every eye and death is no more and mourning and crying and pain are no more. Somewhere in the middle, we are like this woman—raised up by Jesus and called to be servants who love one another and extend that love to neighbor, to be wounded healers until the Kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. That work still begins in our homes and in our families, but it extends ultimately to the neighborhood and then to the ends of the earth, and back again.

That is why eight of our parishioners are traveling this week to war-torn El Salvador to accompany the Church there and to insist that they are not alone. That is why Episcopal Relief and Development supports the Al Ahli Arab Hospital, one of the few medical facilities in war-torn Gaza. That isn’t an easy task because to some it may seem like caring for Palestinian Arabs is taking sides in a political disagreement; some might even say that makes us less supportive of the state of Israel. But Jesus said our neighbor includes even first-century Samaritans; surely that must by extension also include twenty-first century Palestinians.

So there is a picture that appeared last month in *Episcopal Life* of our Presiding Bishop taking the hand of an injured Palestinian man in that hospital in Gaza, and I can’t help but to want to juxtapose that image with the one of Jesus taking the hand of Simon’s mother-in-law as evidence that this work of the gospel continues. It isn’t finished yet. Healing of our bodies and of the Body of Christ and ultimately of the Body Politic requires work and faith and courage and risk. We, too, are made whole so that we can get up and serve as instruments of peace in a war-torn and broken world.

I am particularly indebted in this sermon to Ched Myers for his extraordinary commentary on Mark’s Gospel, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus, Orbis Books, 1989.