

5th Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon 2.8.15

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you
come alive, and go do it—because what the world
needs is people who have come alive.

~Howard Thurman

(according to Gil Bailie)

I wasn't much of a waitress: I've told you this before. Though I spent many years on and off waiting on tables, I wasn't much good at it. The succession of restaurants where I served will tell you as much. I went from fine dining to deli to diner. It all amounted to a decade of decline that, oddly, I increasingly enjoyed. Something about not having to be so polite all the time...

My final stop was when I was in my early 20s, prior to divinity school, a two-year period when I was, not only a waitress, but also a golf course greens-keeper, a comedy club ticket saleswoman, and a house- and dog-sitter. This was all to support my unpaid work of writing short stories and shooting the breeze with my pastor in his office in the church.

I remember once, when I was leaving our office hours—okay, *his* office hours—for a shift at the diner, he said that waiting on tables struck him as good training for being a Christian.

Uh-oh, was my thought.

He used this story as evidence—this story of Jesus and Simon's mother-in-law who, now healed of her fever, got up out of bed and immediately began to serve them.

Now is the time when I might issue a trigger warning: if you tend to be set off by overt sexism, then you should be warned. But I'm not going to do that; I'm not going to issue such a warning, because I don't think this is quite the sexist story that it might at first seem. I don't think so because, if Simon's mother-in-law is to be an example to us (and I think she is, though I don't think this of all biblical characters: I don't think the Bible simply a storehouse of stock characters to be examples to us: the Bible isn't an after-school special; and yet I do think this of Simon's mother-in-law, however) not because she was an exemplary *woman*, but because she was an exemplary *receiver* and grace and *responder* to grace.

That's awkward grammatically, so let me try again. I don't think Simon's mother-in-law is exemplary as a woman, now well enough to remember her proper place, in serving men. No, I think she's exemplary as someone who's received of the good news of Jesus Christ and who is moved to the right response, in serving any and all for the sake of the gospel.

Please note that this woman's service is spoken of in the Greek term *diakono*, which you might recognize for its similarity to "deaconate," the committee in many congregations that oversees worship; and its similarity to "deacon," one of the people who serves on the deaconate.

It's funny to note that, throughout church history, there have been congregations and denominations amidst which only men can be deacons. Some churches won't even consider women as deacons. So, no, I don't think this incident between Jesus and Simon's mother-in-law is sexist. What it just might be is avant-garde.

Meanwhile, for his part, Jesus was having the perhaps strange experience of compelling all causes of suffering to flee away. In the synagogue, as we heard last week, the unclean spirit within the man fled when Jesus suddenly showed up. In Simon's house, as we heard this morning, the fever within his mother-in-law left her as soon as Jesus took her hand and lifted her up. Soon enough, he would be confronted by many who were sick and whom he cured, many who had demons that he would cast out.

Strange perhaps to him, because, who know? Strange perhaps to us because, I mean, who really believes in demons anymore?

I asked this last week, and it didn't land the way I intended. (That happens sometimes.) I asked it ironically because, as it happens, I believe in demons, unclean spirits; and I know several others in the congregation do as well. I just don't believe in them as, say, horror movies might have us imagine them—grotesque monsters that afflict individuals for various reasons or for no reason at all. But my lack of confidence in this sort of demon is only because of my lack of experience of such a thing—which I'm fine with.

What experience I do have, though, is when a spirit other than the spirit of God seems to have taken over an interaction, a gathering, a situation, or circumstance.

Consider: the Christian faith would have us believe in the Holy Spirit, just as said in one of our earliest creeds, the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." The Holy Spirit: by name this calls the question, are there other types of spirits, types other than "Holy"? If not, then why the need to specify?

If there is a spirit of truth, might there also be a spirit of untruth?

If there's a spirit of reconciliation, might there also be spirits of accusation and acrimony?

In a word, yes. I've seen it. I can testify to it. I've certainly had to pray in resistance of it—in my home church, years ago, when the new pastor showed himself to be ill-qualified for the work; in

faculty meetings at BCD years ago when a word spoken got misconstrued and misremembered; my God, yesterday at Jack's basketball game (his last basketball game!) as the teasers kept up their teasing and this mother got filled with a spirit other than holy. The suddenness by which a group gathered in a good spirit can become possessed of an otherwise spirit: it's downright commonplace.

And why not? After all, according to Mark at least, the darkness will even come hunting for the light. Yes, according to Mark, it isn't just that light causes the darkness to flee, but also that the darkness comes hunting for the light.

"Hunted." Later on in this same reading, later on in this same day, Jesus is described as "hunted"—a word that should catch our attention. Mark makes use of it but eight times in his gospel. Hunted: twice it's to characterize people who approach Jesus with some distraction, some request or demand that runs contrary to his true mission; five times it's used to describe the actions of those who seek to kill him—the chief priests and scribes twice hunting for a way to kill him, some Pharisees hunting him amidst a crowd, the whole council hunting for people to offer testimony against him, and Judas hunting for a chance to betray him; and once, here, it's used to describe the disciples, Simon and his companions, hunting in the still-dark morning for Jesus who'd gone out to a deserted place to pray.

It makes for strange bedfellows, doesn't it? Jesus' friends in league with those who would kill Jesus? Strange: distressing.

Then there's this: the striking fact that those to recognize Jesus as the Holy One of God have been so far not the disciples and not the seekers of healing, not even those who have been healed, but only these two: the Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism and the unclean spirits whom he would then cast out, one of whom got it right on the mark. "What have you to do with us?" it cried out in a loud voice. "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

As for everyone else, though attracted to, and awed by, the wonders Jesus was working, they had little idea of what it all meant—that Jesus had indeed come, if not to destroy that which seeks to destroy, at least to silence it, to neutralize it, or perhaps even to transform it. Really, not even the disciples seemed to have any idea of what it all meant—that Jesus had indeed come to complete the creation that was yet incomplete and by filling it with a *holy* spirit; that he had indeed come to perfect all people and all peoples that we might live by love and thrive by grace that all might have life and have it in abundance, and that death shall be no more, and mourning and crying and pain shall be no more. Amazed by the signs and miracles and healings, few seemed to notice that Christ's coming

and presence were actually a much bigger deal than any single wonder-work or even series of wonder-works.

And Jesus seemed eager to keep it that way. This is the gospel of the messianic secret. Mark's is the gospel that features the Messiah telling all who did recognize him not to tell anyone else what they now knew. And we can only wonder why Mark's Jesus was so secretive; we can never absolutely know, just occasionally suppose. That Jesus wanted to forestall the notice of those in power who would then surely see to his death; that Jesus knew he had a lot of ground to cover (literally and figuratively) over the course of his ministry, which too much attention would likely make difficult if not impossible; that he himself was new to his being the Christ (announced at his baptism according to this gospel, but not before—not at his birth, not at his conception, certainly not at the dawn of creation) and so he needed time for he himself to come to grips before attracting the attention of everyone else: these are a few answers that the Church has supposed. My answer this week has been a suspicion that Jesus knew he risked becoming a celebrity, and that being a celebrity would foreclose on him being the Christ.

This speaks also to why the disciples were said to have “hunted” for Jesus. Coming to him in order to tell him that everyone was searching for him, Simon and his companions perhaps liked the thrill-ride their lives had recently become. They were “with the band,” so to speak, and this was exciting, and they wanted to keep it going! So, as others would do later on, hunting him down with distractions and temptations, the disciples did so now, hunting him that he might give the people what they want.

That's you do, right? You give the people what they want.

Well, not Jesus, or at least not exactly. No, instead, Jesus would go on to neighboring towns, as he said, “...so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And, yes, he'd continue his work of casting out demons and healing the sick, but first and foremost he would proclaim the message—that the kingdom of God is at hand and that there is forgiveness of all sin and reconciliation for every division, that there is redemption for everything that seems a waste and remembrance for everything that seems cut off, that we are called to live in this grand knowledge that in God all things are made one, and that everything the intends contrary to that simply doesn't stand a chance.

As it happens, this is a message that, as Paul rightly said, gives no one any ground for boasting and so isn't the sort of thing someone seeking celebrity-status would proclaim. On the

contrary, it's a message that becomes a commission, an obligation. Really, this is a message that makes of its hearers not celebrities but servants, servants to its cause that love will prevail.

This section of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is one of his better-known pieces of writing—this notion of becoming all things to all people. It's even made its way into American idiom, for better or for worse, said both sincerely and cynically: all things to all people.

And, to be honest, it's hard not to hear this as cynical; it's hard not to imagine Paul as more a salesperson than a bringer of good news, something freely offered to be freely received. But what I think Paul was laboring to name was how he offers the good news of God to all sorts of people—in service.

How he does it is in service. To those living under strict religious law, becoming someone living under strict religious law; to those living by erudition and sophistication, become someone erudite and sophisticated; to those who weak and poor and meek, becoming himself weak and poor and meek: you offer the gospel by recognizing others as they are, accepting others as they are, and joining others where they are in the faith that, by joining one to another you are *doing* the gospel, you are reconciling and remembering and re-binding what has come lose or been cut off, you are setting to flight the spirit of acrimony and acting on a spirit of healing and wholeness.

In service is how it's done—for Simon's mother-in-law, for Paul, and for us. And I understand, of course, that not all acts of service are the same. Not all acts of service are acts in service of the gospel. Some, compelled by force or coerced by fear, are dehumanizing in the highest order. It'd be an offense to liken American slavery to discipleship, although many a preacher attempted to do so, especially when the abolition movement was gathering steam. Some acts of service are simply not yours to do. If it makes you heavy with resentment, if love feels far away whenever you're doing it, then it's likely not yours to do. In short, and to little surprise, service, like all other things in the world, can fall under a spirit other than holy.

It's a process, and it takes time. To find what service is yours to do in life takes time, and prayer, and more than a little frustration, and still more hope. Why, just look at me. I've finally found the table I happily wait on. The menu is limited, bread and wine, but that's good for me because I could confuse orders. The clientele is varied: you never know what you're gonna get because all are welcome. But my co-workers are great—serious and light, smart and humble.

If you want to know more, you could ask anyone here.

Thanks be to God.