

February 8, 2015  
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Mark 1:29-39

## Muriel

Martha, Ruth, Queen Esther ... what do these names have in common?

They are the names of some of the circles that met here at IPLC in the course of its history, those circles being women's groups. The circles were given those names because they are the names of some of the more well-known women in the Bible. (I rather like that one of the circles was the *Queen* Esther circle.) I visited our Miriam circle recently, and we were talking about names of some women in the Bible and the names of other historic circles here, including one called the Muriel circle. "Huh," I said, "I'm not sure that I know of a Muriel in the Bible... She must be one of the less well-known women."

We meet another woman in the Bible in today's gospel reading, and I think it's safe to say that she is one of the less well-known ones. She appears briefly, but what she does is important. We could add her to that list of names, if we knew her name... but we don't, we only know her by relationship: she is Simon's mother-in-law.

Simon, or Simon Peter, is probably one of the more well-known people in the Bible. He gets two names—heck, he even gets three names. "Peter" is the nickname that is given to him by Jesus. In the epistles, the apostle Paul calls him Cephas. And Simon? Maybe that's what his mother-in-law called him. For simplicity's sake, for this sermon, we'll refer to him as Peter. Peter is one of the first disciples Jesus calls to follow, and Peter appears in a number of later stories. Catholic tradition identifies him as the first pope. (Eventually, tradition changed its requirements regarding marital circumstances of spiritual leaders, for if we consider Peter to be the first pope, it must also be noted, that if had a mother-in-law, he had a wife.)

Back to that unnamed mother-in-law. She lives in Capernaum, in the region of Galilee. Just verses before, in last week's gospel reading Jesus was in Capernaum in the synagogue, where he encountered a man with an unclean spirit, a man in need of healing. Today's reading picks up just where last week's left off, with Jesus leaving the synagogue and entering the house where Peter's mother-in-law is. She's in need of healing, too, she's sick in bed with a fever. Back then, with no Advil or aspirin, no antibiotics, a fever could be dangerous, life threatening. As soon as Jesus leaves the synagogue, he comes to her, and in the same way, with that same authoritative healing, Jesus takes her by the hand. Reaching out for what is unhealthy, Jesus lifts her up, and heals her. The fever leaves, and she begins to serve.

Quite the speedy recovery! The fever leaves, and immediately she begins to serve them. It's almost sounds like she hopped out of bed to pull three casseroles out of the oven and set the table for the sudden crowd. Now, notwithstanding the fact that I know some women who do just this, including women in this church, it's worth taking a minute to consider just what this means.

Some take issue with the implications. I, too, find myself wondering about it, wondering about what it means, how to understand it, how it fits in the broader context of the story. The men are out and about, following Jesus as he teaches and heals, but the first mention of a specific woman has her defined by her relationship to a man, and trapped inside with illness. And as soon as she's healed, she starts serving them. It doesn't help that she doesn't have a name.

Put like that, it makes me feel a little hot. Certainly, in the time in which the gospels were written, there were burning gender inequalities, narrow roles and limited opportunities. Sadly, it's not all in the distant past. You can hear stories about it from your mother, or your mother-in-law. Or maybe you can tell some of those stories yourself.

You and I know that we are still living into a more just present, for women—and for men, for “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” That’s from an epistle. It’s from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s letter from Birmingham jail. King wrote, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality... Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

We are still living into this network of mutuality, we are still living into a more just present, we are still living into the good news of Jesus Christ, who confronts and dismantles injustice and inequality. Jesus teaches that God loves all people, no matter their ethnicity, or age, or sex, or sexual orientation, or social status, or history,. Jesus encounters, and heals, men and woman, men who have unclean spirits, and women whom sickness has confined inside. The good news of Jesus encounters and reveals all sickness, all sin, in women and men, and heals it—heals us. Heals us, so we can serve.

Let us wonder about that—about what it means to serve, and about its implications. I wonder if it is our understanding of “to serve” that is too narrow. Most certainly, we can and should think of serving as what happens at a table—and what an important role that is, preparing and offering food for all the people in the house, creating an atmosphere of invitation and welcome and sustenance. Literally putting food on the table. That is a vital way to serve.

I’m thinking, too, of many other aspects and understandings of “to serve.” What about thinking of “to serve” in athletic terms, for example. I know we have volleyball players here, perhaps we have tennis players, too. Think of to serve and then think of Venus or Serena Williams. You need strength to serve, you need to be healthy. Or I’m thinking of the motto of police officers, of our men and women in uniform, whose motto is to serve and protect. And of course, to serve is what scouts do, it’s how you fulfill your oath.

These are just my musings about “to serve,” as I think of how we use the term and what it implies. Even more than these, “to serve” has broad implications in the context of Bible, in the story it tells, and what the term communicates. In the gospels, “to serve” is connected to tables, too, it has sacramental implications; to serve makes a powerful connection to Holy Communion. In the epistles, in descriptions of church leaders, the term used is the Greek word for servant. Most significantly, think of the way that Jesus talks about serving. Jesus says, “You want to be great? Be a servant.” And Jesus says of himself, “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.”

In the gospel according to Mark, Peter’s mother-in-law is the first person to serve Jesus. She is the first person to do so, just after and just as the angels did for Jesus in the wilderness. In the course of the gospel we hear about other unnamed women, and then near the very end, we hear about some women who are following Jesus, watching as he is crucified. Some of these women are mentioned by name: Mary, Mary Magdalene, Salome, but there are others, too, who are not named. The gospel says they are some of the many women who, back in Galilee, provided for him. More specifically, the word the gospel writer says, these women *served* Jesus. These women will continue to serve, three days later, as they go, they think, to care for a corpse, and discover an empty tomb.

We don’t know much about Peter’s mother-in-law, not even her name. Maybe it was Muriel. We do know that to serve is to be part of the good news of Jesus Christ. To serve is to respond to healing, and to work for justice, and to set the table for love. Countless unnamed women and men have been part of this history. We have been called, daughters and sons, to serve, now.