

²⁹As soon as [Jesus and the disciples] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. ³²That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. ³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

At this point in Mark's narrative, Jesus has only four followers: Simon, Andrew, James, and John. The five of them enter the synagogue in Capernaum that sits right on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. There Jesus teaches the community and he heals a man with an unclean spirit. Then today's gospel begins. Upon leaving the synagogue, Simon and Andrew immediately lead Jesus and the other two to their home. Inside the home they find Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. We don't know the details surrounding the fever, but a fever then was a much more dire situation than it

is today because of our modern medicine. Seeing this, Jesus takes the woman's hand, lifts her up, the fever leaves her, and immediately she serves them.

Wait... shouldn't these men be serving her? Shouldn't they make sure she's hydrated, feed her some noodle soup, and allow her to regain her strength? The fact that she immediately served these five men strikes us as peculiar and even sexist. There is a narrow-minded view of gender roles that is at play in this story. We are not bound to enact the social customs of a society which existed centuries ago on another continent. However, having an understanding of their social customs can open our eyes to better see God's activity in the story.

In the Galilean communities of that time, people had certain and expected roles to fulfill. Once you became of age, you stepped in to filling a role for the community, and basically you kept that role in the community for the rest of your life. It is safely assumed that the role of this woman was to care for others, namely the men who entered this home. However, when we meet her in this story, the fever is preventing her from fulfilling her role.

Interestingly, the verb used by the gospel writer Mark is that Jesus "raised up" her. Mark will later use this same verb of "raising up" on several occasions to describe Jesus' healing of individuals. In all those circumstances, the person is raised up and restored to their community or to a close relationship. When someone is brought low by unclean spirits, illness, or death itself, Mark says Jesus raises them again to fulfill their valued role in the community. Interestingly, Mark also uses this "raised up" verb to describe Christ's resurrection.

After being raised up, the woman in our story serves those five men. That “serving” is the same verb that Jesus later uses to describe the life his disciples are called to lead. Interestingly, “serving” is the verb that Jesus uses to describe his own ministry in Mark 10:45. Mark’s point in using these two verbs time and again is to show us how Christ’s resurrection impacts our lives now. As God raises up Jesus and Jesus serves us, so does Jesus raise us up to return to our communities to serve. The woman we encounter in the gospel today is the first person in Mark’s gospel to fit this formula. Yes, the woman literally served the men food in her house. Yet, there is more: this woman is the first person to fulfill the role of a disciple in Mark’s gospel. She has been raised up by Jesus, and that experience has led her to fulfill her valued role in the community, which is a role defined by serving. Simon, Andrew, James, and John may have been called to follow, but they haven’t yet fulfilled Mark’s definition of discipleship: serving as a result of an experience with Jesus. That will come later for them.

The idea that the first person to fulfill Mark’s definition of discipleship remains nameless is relevant for us. How often is that our Christian service is not glamorous, rewarding, or even acknowledged by anyone else? The lauds and accolades are not the point, after all. The service is not about how well our names will last through time, rather it’s about a humble response to the activity of Christ in our lives. Like this woman, or the man healed in the synagogue, or the others who make appearances in Mark’s gospel, *how has Jesus raised us up?* When in our lives did we receive healing? When were we rid of something like an unclean spirit? When were we seen for who we are by a loving God? When have we experienced a restoration of community, or a relationship mended? Can we see Christ as the source of those “raised up”

experiences? Finding our place in the community -- like in this congregation or in the broader community -- how do we then serve within that community?

Those are questions that can be answered any number of ways, which is of course how it is supposed to be. But I hope you will consider with me how we as a congregation have made it thus far through this pandemic. Do we see Christ raising us up, encountering us, and building us as a community? How then do we serve others, both in the All Saints community and the broader community? I honestly believe the best way to serve others right now is by wearing our masks, listening to the advice of medical experts, and getting our vaccine as soon as we are eligible for it. Doing that is the best way to serve others around us. That is not extraordinary and attention-grabbing, but true service rarely is. Getting the vaccine is the best way to help this congregation and the broader community to return to something close to normal. As Pastor Ginger recently said, we have medical professionals in this congregation who are willing to answer your questions about vaccinations.

The woman in today's gospel lesson was the first in a long list of people who have had an experience with Jesus. Her story might not strike us as glamorous, but it is one that is a model for our discipleship. We are given a community out of which we serve others. We serve because Jesus has raised us up in some way. Like he has done with this woman, with the man in the synagogue, and with so many others in Capernaum and elsewhere, Jesus brings us back. Back to community; back to meaningful relationships; back to fulfilling a treasured role within the community; back to serving others.

Thanks be to God. Amen.