

## Sermon Rev Jo Smith February 4th 2024

I wasn't a very good Brownie. I remember going camping; the troop had this system of demerits for rule infractions. Demerits could be given for anything from sleeping late, to not rolling your sleeping bag up properly, to not being able to light the fire but in any case, whoever ended up at the end of the weekend with the most demerits, had to take home something extra to clean and polish for the troop before the next meeting.

I will confess to you now, that I usually came home with something extra to clean and polish

I've often thought about that over the years... how 'messing up' brought on doing "something extra" for the troop. It didn't make sense. If we were supposed to be learning about how cool it is to *serve* others, why was it a punishment to *serve* our own troop? Wouldn't it have made more sense, if the person who *didn't* mess up all weekend would get to take the grills home? I mean, wouldn't it have been more in the service theme... wouldn't it have been an honor?

Somewhere in our culture, we have adopted the notion that if we do what we are supposed to do, then we somehow get *out* of doing more work... and that's the aim. In fact, even our work is supposed to eventually take us to the point where we don't have to work anymore. After a lifetime of vocation, we are supposed to be able to rest... *retire*, we call it. This all makes sense to us.

The passage from Mark picks up right after the temple scene from last week; Jesus had been preaching in the temple, and the man with the unclean spirit called out, and Jesus healed him. But now, Jesus has put in a full day, and he wants to go relax. So Peter says to him "Come to my house- kick back, get some food, My mother in law is probably cooking right now- and despite how I complain about her, she actually is a great cook! Come on Jesus... you deserve it- you worked hard."

And they go- Jesus and the disciples make the trek to Peter's house but when they get there, there are no tempting smells coming from the stove, In fact, the house is quiet; so Peter calls out, "Hey... Anybody

home?" ...and he promptly disappears, leaving Jesus and the others in the front hall.

In a few minutes, he returns; a little apologetic and a little sheepish, and begins to tell his friends... "Look, um, my mother-in-law is sick. She can't cook tonight. Sorry... I know I promised you, but she just can't make it... she hasn't been out of bed all day."

But Jesus interrupts... "Where is she Peter? Let me see her."

And when they get to his mother in law's room, Jesus looks at her- smiles- and "takes her by the hand and lifted her up" and the fever leaves her... and she gets up and begins to cook for everyone.

Now women- don't freak out. I know that the first several hundred times I read this passage I thought to myself.... 'Of *course* Jesus healed her- they needed someone to make them some dinner! Forget any of the men doing anything to cook! As if Jesus is saying... "What do you mean she's sick? Oh no no no no... we can't have this... where is she Peter? I'll have her up and cooking in no time... I'm starved!"

But after I had time to read- reflect- pray- reflect- pray... I began to see the passage in a different light. So let's look again...

So, we're back in the bedroom- Jesus takes Peter's Mother in Law by the hand and lifts her up- the fever leaves her, and she gets up and begins to cook for everyone. Jesus... lifts her up. In the Greek- he raises her. Now, there are a couple of interesting things here.

First, the woman is healed... and unlike many stories of healing in the Bible, Peter's MIL doesn't get healed because of her great faith- there is no mention that she believed at all. She is healed, 'made whole,' the text says, by a tender touch from Jesus.

We need to be near to Jesus to be healed. In fact, some say that's the very reason for the incarnation- for God to have come to earth in human form. Humans need intimacy- we need to be near each other to help one another to wholeness.

Second, she doesn't get raised up so that she can sit and rest... in fact, the woman gets right out of bed and begins to work...to serve. This is the part that I think is so totally out there. Because here is the way that

our world works: "If you work hard- you get to rest. If you work hard enough, you get promoted- and the premise is, that the higher you go up the proverbial ladder of success, the easier the "work" becomes. In fact, we go from being a servant, to having others serve us. That's what its about, right? That we get to a place, finally, where people can come and do things for *us*. After all 'we have earned it,' we say, and we have 'paid our dues, so now someone else at the bottom can do the dirty jobs!'

But here- Jesus blows all of that ideology right out the window, and shows us that when we are really touched by Jesus- and have allowed Jesus to come near and make us whole, that the system is reversed- we *are* elevated... we are raised to the highest calling.. to serve others.

But if we look at what it means to be a follower of Christ, then what we are supposed to be working toward is not to have others eventually serve us, but rather to learn how to serve others. Jesus heals this woman- she is brought to wholeness- to completeness- she is raised up and she lives into her calling to serve others.

Jesus' first action in Mark's Gospel is to cast out an unclean spirit and I've always seen in that God's commitment to stand against all the powers that keep us from abundant life. This week that pattern continues. Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, restoring her to her community and vocation. And it's not only this one woman, mother to Jesus' new disciple. It's all kinds of people, as Jesus heals and cares and restores countless people, setting them free from illness and possession to be the person God created them to be.

This isn't just the message of the first chapter of Mark, of course, it consumes the whole of his account, all the other gospels as well and, indeed, the whole of Scripture: God wants to set free all of us so that we might live into our God-given identity and potential, claiming our calling as children of God, and join God in the mission to love and bless the world.

But is this what you've heard? I wonder. I don't say this to be critical, but rather to invite self-reflection. And so I'll start with my own preaching, I think I have often indeed preached about the freedom our life in Christ imparts, but it has perhaps leaning toward naming freedom *from* the many things that harass us. Freedom from sin, of course. But also freedom from various manifestations of sin we might name as fear, loss, despair, insecurity, and all manner of things that plague us. In my bolder moments, I have also invited us to hear God's promise – and to help make it true through our actions – to free us and all people from hunger and violence and discrimination and inequality of all kinds.

All of this is well and good and, indeed, at the heart of the Gospel and certainly part of today's passage. Jesus frees Peter's mother-in-law *from* illness. He frees crowds of people *from* disease and possession as well. But I am not sure I have always moved as quickly or confidently to another dimension of the Gospel: that Jesus frees us not only *from* things that seek to oppress us, but also *for* a life of purpose, meaning, and good works. (Yes, good works, not those things that we do in the vain hope of justifying ourselves before God or others, but rather those things that we do as a response to the Gospel to serve our neighbor stemming from a sense of joy, love, and freedom.)

Which makes me wonder. What did all the people Jesus heals in this week's story do once they are freed from the various ailments of mind, body, and spirit that had captivated them? Some, I imagine, were simply so grateful to be made well – so grateful, that is, that they had been freed from something debilitating or destructive – that they returned as quickly as possible to their old lives and routines and relationships. But some, I'm willing to bet, including Simon's mother-in-law, recognize that they weren't only freed from something, they were also freed *for* something, for lives of purpose and meaning and service and generosity and more.

So here's my question and thought, loved ones. I wonder after opening up this passage and taking a bit of time to make clear this distinction between being freed *from* things that hold us back and being freed *for* many more things, I wonder if I might ask you what you have been freed for. What, that is, calls to you? What – or who – needs you this week? Might you imagine that each time you are serving and responding to needs of the people and world around you, you are responding to God's call and living into the freedom that is ours in Christ? You might know the quotation from Frederick Buechner: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." I invite you to claim this freedom and this calling for yourselves.