

The Table That Sustains
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Mark 1:29-39. "Wellness" In the Reign of God

What ails us this snowy Super Bowl Sunday morning? What fever grips us to the point of desperation?

Is it "Brady Bashing Fever"? A desperate determination to drive Tyreek Hill into the endzone for a go-ahead touchdown?

Is it a fire in the belly that joins our Native American siblings in the faith calling for sports teams to cease and desist mascots and imagery that depict their people from a white supremacist perspective?

Is it COVID?

Or the ongoing fallout from this global pandemic that lingers without end. The loneliness. The uncertainty. The fear. The survivors' guilt.

What is it that ails us this snowy Super Bowl Sunday morning? What fever grips us to the point of desperation, as we gather in our own online "Village of Comfort" on this snowy Sabbath Super Bowl Day?

Whatever it is, we can be sure those gathered in Capernaum in our Scripture are feeling it too. Something is not quite right on this particular Sabbath day. Someone is missing: the mother-in-law of Simon. Who is bedridden. Burning with "demonic force," as her community would have interpreted her illness. "Homebound," as we would say in the church today. The mother-in-law of Simon has missed out on the healing and the wholeness and the hope of that morning with Jesus in the gathering of the people.

And they miss her. And she misses them.

And so "immediately" after leaving the spiritual home of the synagogue, Simon brings Jesus to the actual home of his mother-in-law and begs Jesus to help her.

Now we could get cynical here. The immediate response of our all-female Teach the Preacher gathering earlier this week sure was. "Typical!" one of them snorted. All these men have to make Jesus heal the woman so she can *serve* them! Not exactly the "coming reign of God" WE were looking for!

And I agree!

But if we scratch beneath the surface of the story, as we did in our Teach the Preacher gathering, we see something much more profound going on. The mother-in-law of Simon is, as far as we can tell, quite poor. Very likely a widow, living with her daughter's family. Meaning we can assume her sons – which for Jewish women in the first century are the greatest form of "wealth" – are either non-existent or no longer living.

Imagine the modern day equivalent of an undocumented immigrant grandmother without health insurance in the middle of a pandemic.

Simon, himself—the mother-in-law's current provider—is also poor. Among the class of fishermen who does not even own a boat. Simon and his brother, Andrew, wade waist deep every day into the water of the Sea of Galilee to cast their nets, gathering whatever fish are swarming in the shoals along the shoreline.

It is a subsistence living in good times. But the way things are going with the Roman commercialization of the Sea of Galilee, and its subsequent overfishing of the waters in this supposed land of promise and plenty, even this subsistence living is literally and metaphorically “drying up.”

Not only that, but Simon and Andrew have just thrown away what little hope remained as fishermen in order to join this Jesus guy from Nazareth in proclaiming the coming kingdom of God! A decision that likely leaves the women of the house truly panicked about where their next meal will come from.

The mother-in-law of Simon may, in fact, be ill. Or she may just be flat-out exhausted by the weight of it all. She has, after all, been waiting on the reign God for an awfully long time.

So here comes Jesus.

And he could, if he were the magical guy in the sky by-and-by that we want him to be, just patch her up with an ice-pack and a pat on the shoulder and send her running back down the field with two minutes to go in the game. No pain, no gain. All for the good of the team.

Instead Jesus *raises* her. The Scripture says Jesus raises her!

By that, I mean that the Gospel writer uses the same word here to describe the raising of the mother-in-law of Simon that the same writer uses fifteen chapters later to describe the raising of Jesus. Meaning that the raising of Simon’s mother-in-law is the first resurrection to occur in the gospels!

Meaning that when the mother-in-law of Simon begins “serving” Jesus and Simon and Andrew and James and John on that Sabbath day—at the table – in response to her resurrected life, the mother-in-law of Simon becomes the very first “eucharistic minister” in the biblical tradition. A “deacon,” which is the word in Greek used here to describe her new ministry of “service” with her new human family.

Simon and Andrew may have left everything to follow Jesus. But it is the mother-in-law of Simon who really “gets it” about what Jesus is trying to do. She who has served so very many for so very long—perhaps out of love, perhaps out of economic necessity—can go no further without the touch of the coming realm of God.

And it is the same for us.

In order to keep serving—out of love or out of necessity—we must be healed, we must be restored, we must be refreshed for new life. And so we come to the table of sustenance to find that new life for ourselves.

But our healing, our salvation, our *resurrected lives* is not for ourselves alone! The table of sustenance gifts us with the power of the reign of God to heal *others* in the same way. The mother-in-law of Simon, the eucharistic minister, knows it.

We, I hope, know it.

Simon, God bless him, does not.

He thinks it all depends on Jesus, himself.

“Where have you been?” you can almost hear Simon demanding when Jesus goes off by himself to pray. “We need you!”

But Jesus has already ordained the eucharistic minister of the first “house church” of the Jesus movement. The mother-in-law of Simon can keep the ministry Jesus has initiated through her going on just fine without him.

Jesus has been called to proclaim the coming reign of God throughout *the rest* of Galilee. Raising up more of the poorest of the poor to live as “the provisional demonstration” of that reign, which is what I keep saying is our job as the church today.

The home of the resurrected mother-in-law of Simon becomes the prototype for that provisional demonstration, as Jesus and his merry men move on to the neighboring towns and villages. The home of the resurrected mother-in-law of Simon becomes the prototype for all of the house churches in which the earliest Christians would gather for over two hundred years as a new human family to claim that same resurrecting power for themselves: by serving one another, by feeding at the table of sustenance, by claiming the waters of baptism.

In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that the house church of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is the model for how we have fumbled into ministry today at SPC in the middle of pandemic.

We are, in fact, gathering in our houses. But we are not alone. We are reaching out a healing hand to God and to one another, raising each other up in a provisional demonstration of the reign of God.

Just this week our own Chris Madeo ended up in the hospital for an emergency appendectomy, leaving her cell phone charger in the car. Lo and behold, on her way to surgery, flat on her back on the journey, Chris feels a plop on her belly. Rie Wilson has bolted from home to replenish Chris’s cell phone charger and placed it where Chris can pick it up on the other side of having her appendix removed.

Just this morning Bert Wright reached out bright and early to make sure I got the message that the Community Meal is ON this afternoon. Just like the Post Office, through sleet, snow, wind and hail, to proclaim the coming reign of God by extending the table of sustenance beyond ourselves.

In just a few moments you and I will share the SouperBowl challenge to continue the eucharistic ministry of the mother-in-law of Simon with Shepherdstown Shares and the Jefferson County Community Ministries.

The eucharistic ministry of the resurrection mother-in-law of Simon continues. Every time we reach out a hand – in person or in prayer – and raise up one another when we are losing hope.

Sustained by grace. Commissioned for grace. In our baptism. At the table. So that we, too, might proclaim the coming reign of God, in our own provisional way, right here in this Village of Comfort.

Amen.