

**February 18, 2018**

**First Sunday of Lent**

**Mark 1: 29-31; 10: 35-45**

**Prayer:** Dear God, help us hold the Christ-light for our brothers and sisters as we seek to serve you. In the name of the Christ, Amen.

### **Serving, Naturally**

I was listening to NPR on my way to work this week. A reporter was interviewing a relatively young farmer in North Carolina.

He talked about how he had learned all about farming from his grandparents. “The summer I really understood what farming meant,” he said, “was during a drought. I watched my grandmother carry four milk gallon jugs of water every night to her garden. Without that water, she told me, all the previous work of gardening would be for nothing.”

I thought that was nice, that he was crediting these elderly, bent grandparents for this sizeable farm he had established. And then he said, “Yeah, she carried that water every night, and she had to be in her early 60s.”

Wait a minute. What??!!

I have mentioned before that my grandparents had a farm in northeast Georgia where I spent a lot of time growing up. In fact, that’s where my mystery novels are set.

My grandparents were born into farming families in the early 1900s. They both had only eighth-grade educations, but they could do more than anyone I’ve ever known.

Before he purchased his farm, my grandfather owned a machine shop. He could fix anything. I remember after his “fixing” days were over, my dad would ask him to just sit and advise him whenever he attempted a tricky project.

My grandmother was what Roseanne Barr would call a goddess of the domestic arts. She gardened and canned every vegetable and fruit grown in Georgia. She grew flowers.

She raised chickens and mysteriously killed them out of my sight. Then she fried them. She hand-rolled biscuits and baked huge, multi-layer coconut cakes.

In fact, she cooked two hot meals a day for anyone who might be around.

She made quilts. She embroidered. She knitted baby blankets for all my children.

She sewed all of her own clothes and a good many of mine and my sister’s.

I thought that was what grandmothers did. If I ever have grandchildren, they are going to learn that is not the case.

Much later, when I was covering arts for *The Greenville News*, I ran into people who could do one or two of the things my grandmother did. They called themselves textile artists, and made lots of money.

My grandmother never made any money, as far as I know. Because all her work went to us.

I don’t know if it was that generation or if certain people are simply born with the gift of hospitality and generosity. But I’m not sure we see a lot of people anymore to whom service comes so naturally.

In one of the earliest gospel accounts, however, we see this model. Please turn in your Bibles to **Mark 1: 29-31**.

29 As soon as (*Jesus and the disciples*) left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. <sup>30</sup>Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told (Jesus) about her at once.

<sup>31</sup> He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

The text doesn't say it, but I suspect Simon's mother-in-law was somebody's grandmother.

I used to read about this woman getting up to serve her guests as proof that she was healed. Nothing more.

The reader knows the fever has left her, because she was able to get out of bed and serve her guests. It was simply proof of Jesus' miracle.

After all, she was a first-century woman. Her son-in-law brought guests into her house. Of course, she would feed them, maybe repair a toga or a fisherman's rough robe.

But now I think this story may serve another purpose as well. If you've ever studied writing, you've heard, "Don't tell me. Show me."

Don't tell me, "Jonah was angry." Show him yelling at God.

Don't tell me, "The king of Nineveh repented." Show him removing his robe, dressing in sackcloth and sitting in ashes.

In these short verses in Simon Peter's house, Mark *showed* what the kingdom of God would look like. It would look like healing, followed by serving.

*It would look like healing, followed by serving.*

Last week, we talked about the kingdom of God being "among us" or "within us." This week, we're going to talk about what that looks like on the ground. It looks like serving others. Naturally.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the first of six Sundays on our journey toward Easter. It is a time when we consciously try to enter Jesus's life.

It's a time when we symbolically wear those ashes of repentance in which the King of Ninevah sat.

It's a time when we think about the sacrifice Jesus made, and what sacrifice might be asked of us as we follow him.

That's where the custom of abstinence comes from. Abstinence from wine or chocolate or television during Lent.

Although we Protestants are not big on abstaining during Lent, it's a fine idea. Sometimes abstinence can direct our minds where we need them directed.

But the idea behind it is bigger than self-denial. The idea is trying to enter the mind of Jesus. Trying to enter the heart of Jesus.

I think we do that by trying to follow what he said. Trying to emulate what he did.

We find those “sayings” and “doings” most vividly in the gospels. Mark is a vivid storyteller. In the little snippet in Simon Peter’s house, he was *showing* us something, and *foreshadowing* something that Jesus was going to talk more about later.

Later as in chapter 10. Please turn to **Mark 10: 35-45**. Here are James and John, the very disciples who were with Jesus that day in Simon Peter’s house. The very disciples who saw Peter’s mother-in-law jump out of bed to serve them.

35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to (Jesus) and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’ <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, ‘What is it you want me to do for you?’

<sup>37</sup>And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’

<sup>38</sup>But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?’

<sup>39</sup>They replied, ‘We are able.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.’

41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

<sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Mark is showing us two opposite responses to the in-breaking kingdom. One seeks to serve. One seeks to be served. And he makes it pretty clear which one Jesus stands behind.

The disciples James and John, bystanders in the first story, become actors in this second story. And they don't come out nearly as well as Peter's mother-in-law.

This second passage is in Mark's carefully crafted middle section, in which he contrasts the healing of physically blind strangers to the spiritual blindness of the disciples. And James and John, though they have followed Jesus for awhile now, still don't get it.

They are looking for conventional glory, for seats of honor beside the man they're betting on to be the messiah.

Jesus tells them it is indeed the way of the world for rulers to lord it over their subjects. But it is *not* the way of this new kingdom.

In this new kingdom, **“whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”**

The foremost message of the gospel of Mark is the coming kingdom of God. And it is a *kingdom of service*.

Just like Simon Peter's mother-in-law exhibited at the beginning of the ministry. Just like Jesus will exhibit on the cross at the end of his ministry.

A kingdom of service.

We know a lot more about James and John from our gospel stories than we do about Peter's mother-in-law. But the verb that we translate "began to serve" in her story is the Greek word *diakonei*. That's where we get our word for deacon.

You might say that Peter's mother-in-law was the church's first deacon. She was touched by Jesus, and she responded with service.

That is exactly what each of us is supposed to do.

We are touched by Jesus, and we respond with service.

A lot of people give Triune credit for serving in ways that other churches don't, for being what all churches should be. I don't really buy that.

Because I think a lot of churches do a good job of visiting the sick, of taking meals to the bereaved, of including the lonely, of giving to missions. Our work is a little more outwardly than inwardly focused, but serving is serving. Hurting people are hurting people, no matter where they come from.

Plus, a heck of a lot of those churches come here. We have 65 partner churches who come alongside us, leaping up like Peter's mother-in-law to cook meals or give out blankets or assemble toiletry bags. We wouldn't be able to operate without them.

This week I spent time at Aldersgate United Methodist, and tomorrow will be at Covenant Methodist, talking to them about missions, about needs, about possibilities for

service. Meanwhile, eight of our LGBTQ members recently visited First Baptist Greenville. They wanted to see how their monthly LGBTQ Sunday night gathering is organized.

We plan to start something similar in April, and we were blatantly out to steal their ideas.

All of us are seeking the best ways to follow the example of Peter's mother-in-law. Having been touched by Jesus, we long to serve.

But equally importantly, I think, is inviting those served to serve as well. That's why we have so many opportunities to sweep and mop and carry out trash, to give out bulletins and take up the offering and serve communion and lead the responsive reading, to make coffee and serve tea and play instruments. We all need the opportunity to serve Jesus by serving each other.

And it doesn't have to be as formal as a Mission Day or a Service Day. Service can be as simple as an attitude, a response, toward those around us.

Do I look at life with an eye to what I can get, what I can seize, what I can claim?

Or do I look at life with an eye to what I can give, what I can share, what I can let go of?

Do I look at life as something to be hospitably shared as Peter's mother-in-law did? Or as something to be won as James and John viewed it?

You probably saw in the bulletin this morning a warning not to give money if someone asks. I cannot tell you how much it pained me to have to write that, to know that in creating a

space for service and interaction and community building, there are people who take advantage.

But there are. We have watched people take others into their homes. It has never turned out well. It's a fine line, but there are ways of serving well and serving badly.

So how, during this Lenten season, do we live as servants?

How can we be the *slave of all*?

How do we follow a Savior who came not to be served but to serve?

For starters, we can do something as simple as share.

Share lunch.

Share conversation.

Share ourselves.

Share our Savior.

Amen.