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Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

[February 4, 2018](#)

Job 7:1-4, 6-7

Psalms 147

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23

Mark 1:29-39

Today, St. Millie, one of the seldom-noticed model disciples in Mark's Gospel, is going to show us what happens when one is touched by Jesus. Mark didn't actually tell us her name, he only identified her as the mother of Peter's wife. But she's important enough to deserve a name and calling her "Millie" is easier than continually referring to her as Peter's mother-in-law.

Jesus apparently didn't know Millie until he went home with Peter and friends, presumably to get something to eat and discuss the whirlwind day they had just spent going from shore to synagogue. They no sooner get in the house than they inform Jesus that the chief cook, Millie, is laid low with a fever.

Jesus wastes not a moment, but goes right to her bedside and takes her by the hand. Fully aware that he's using loaded language, Mark tells us that Jesus raised her up and the fever left her.

We might read this as a testimony that Millie was no weakling or hypochondriac but a hospitable Jewish mother, ever ready to set the table. Someone else might say that it's a tale reinforcing women's servitude. Those who say the latter might be close to deciphering Mark's message, even if their interpretation is inadequate.

Mark said very clearly that our Millie began to wait on the people in the house. To describe that, he used the verb *diakoneo*, a word variously translated as wait on, minister to, or serve. That word hints that Mark may have used this story to introduce us to the first Christian deacon.

The message is even stronger when we realize that Mark used that word sparsely in his Gospel. The next time Mark uses this word he is quoting Jesus himself. Jesus used the word when he described his own vocation. In response to his disciples who were jockeying for position, Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve" (10:45).

The only other time Mark uses this verb for serving, it again refers to women. He identified the women who stood by Jesus at the cross as including those who "had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him" (15:41).

When Mark says that Millie waited on them, he is giving her higher praise than the apostles ever earned. He is telling us that Millie accepted the gift Jesus was offering the world and responded by becoming a servant like him.



(Mark Bartholomew)

Our other two readings offer different perspectives on the idea of service. Job's lament comes out of his tragic experience of having been blessed with plenty and then losing everything. While he might have felt that he had earned his good life, he was certain that he was not guilty of anything for which God should punish him by stripping him of wealth, health and even his posterity.

Utterly frustrated in his desire for what he understood as justice, Job's experience of undeserved suffering ultimately opened him to a different concept of God and to compassion for others who suffer in innocence. The humiliation of realizing he had done nothing to earn his well-being any more than his suffering opened Job to a more honest relationship with the God, who loves saint and sinner, the strong and the debilitated.

Job's theological reflections taught him about the God who desires life for all of creation. With that, Job was on the way to sharing faith with Millie and Paul.

What Paul adds to our discussion is his sense that once he came to know Christ he was impelled to serve Christ and the Gospel. When he says, "Woe to me if I do not preach it!", Paul admits that the only way to be truly himself is to carry Christ's work forward. Like Millie, he knows that service is the only thing that makes sense of his life, not because he's looking for a reward, but because he is expressing what has come alive within him.

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Today's Liturgy of the Word invites us to spend time with three of our ancestors in faith. Job the theologian will caution us about any sense of entitlement, reminding us that nothing we can do merits life and the love of God. We can only receive them as free gifts. Paul the passionate apostle challenges us to evaluate whether our way of life and the messages we proclaim are true to who we are and God's life in us.

St. Millie leads the way in showing us how to be faithful images of the Master. She demonstrates that sharing God's love can be as simple as setting the table and enjoying communion with anyone who comes.

[Mary M. McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is writing the history of the St. Joseph sisters in the U.S.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org.

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