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by Mary M. McGlone

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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, willing 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.

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.

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.

JOB 7:1-4, 6-7

When we meet Job this weekend he is lamenting his fate. He who once had everything, now finds himself poor, sick and abandoned. His crisis seems to make him realize, perhaps for the first time, that there is real, innocent suffering in life. This is the test of his faith.

According to some scholars, what Job is grieving is the loss of paradise — he's speaking for the children of Adam who realize that the world they receive has been marred. They grieve the fact that happiness and justice are not givens but the precarious outcomes of choices that individuals and groups must make.

If Job ever thought that he was in control of his fate, if he thought that the good things he had in life were his own doing or a reward for his righteousness, his experience of loss destroyed that myth. Perhaps he never fully understood that the wonderful life he had enjoyed was an undeserved, free gift. He was a good man, but he was also lucky, or we might say, an uncommonly blessed man. His unearned loss taught him that one's lot in life doesn't depend on righteousness or what one deserves. Job began to reassess the very meaning of life, and it was coming up short. The only sense he could make of it was that life is a drudgery, that humans are like slaves who hope that their master will get around to feeding them. That was certainly how he felt at the moment and may well have been his new assessment of his previous life: The difference was simply in how well his master or the fates treated him at any given time.

For the first time in his life, instead of seeing things from the vantage point of someone who has everything, he was forced to see life from the perspective of people who suffer. He heard his friends theologize, asserting that God blesses the good and punishes the wicked, but their arguments did not hold water. Job has come up against the hardest question a believer can face: Is it possible to praise God from the depths of misery?

For the moment, Job seems to just sit in his gloom. But in reality, he is complaining, and that is a sign of life. We find his theme echoed by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel as well as in the Book of Psalms. When Job cries out to God, he is making the only act of faith he is capable of at that moment. His complaint prepares him for the revelation he will eventually receive. When God answered him, there were no excuses, just the reminder that Job is not God, that he cannot comprehend God's ways.

Job's salvation is that God's answer is enough for him. He accepts his role as a creature, one made by God, for God and loved in ways he will never be able to fathom. The symbol of his salvation is his return to prosperity. He will never again equate material well-being with being loved by God.

Today's reading doesn't take us through Job's entire drama. We hear no more than his sorry assessment of humanity's lot. The reading prepares us for the Gospel by using Job as the symbol of the world and its people at the time of Christ's coming. There was unexplained and often undeserved suffering. Jesus' mission to make the reign of God present in the

world, to incarnate and give witness to God's love, is the final answer to the question of suffering.

PSALMS 147:1-2, 3-4, 5-6

As we know, a translation is always an interpretation. One must choose the most adequate words possible to express what was originally meant but in a new way and setting. Those who translate the psalms, some of which were written as much as 2,500 years ago, face the immense task of trying to understand the original in its context and then articulating its meaning in contemporary language. That necessarily leads to a rich diversity of attempts. And, the variety can open us to the breadth of meaning of what we are singing and praying with our ancestors in faith.

The Roman Lectionary translates the opening line of Psalm 147 as "Praise the Lord, for he is good; sing praise to our God for he is gracious." Gregory Polan, Hebrew Scripture scholar and Benedictine Abbot Primate, translated this line as "How good to sing psalms to our God; how pleasant to chant fitting praise!" (The Psalms, Songs of Faith and Praise).

The difference in those two translations is between an invitation or injunction to praise and a spontaneous cry of joy in God's goodness. When we pray this psalm in relation to today's readings, we may find that we are challenged with Job to accept the invitation to pray in good times and bad. Then the opening line reminds us that no matter what we are going through, God is good and gracious and waiting for us to discover that truth. At other moments, our spirit may be in tune with Saints Millie and Paul who sang out in joy to the God who gives life and heals every wound. Then, like Mary singing the Magnificat, we sing because rejoicing is our most natural and heartfelt response to having experienced the love of God.

1 CORINTHIANS 9:16-19, 22-23

"Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" That's Paul's basic explanation for everything he is doing. Woe is a pretty strong word in Scripture. Jeremiah (23:1) and Ezekiel (34:2) shouted woe to the self-serving shepherds of God's flocks. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus contrasted the blessed with their rich, well-fed, well-entertained and popular counterparts, for all of whom he predicted long-lasting woes. Jesus also predicted woe for all whose exercise of authority caused suffering and who preached what they did not practice.

From those contexts, we can conclude that woe is the result of being untrue to oneself and one's God-given vocation. When Paul says "Woe to me if I do not preach," he's saying that the Gospel has taken such a hold in him that he cannot be himself if he does not preach it. Preaching the Gospel has become his very nature, and if he does not do it, he is lost to himself and will lose his relationship to God.

Because of that, Paul can refer to himself as a slave or a steward. Not only that, but his responsibility to preach overrides his own personal preferences. He's a well-trained Pharisee, obviously a person with a strong personality and a man who feels an unusual depth of religious freedom. Nevertheless, he will bend to anyone's needs if that will facilitate the spread of the Gospel.

MARK 1:29-39

Mark opens Jesus' public ministry with a flurry of activity that all happens in Capernaum. After the synagogue incident we heard last week, we now hear that Jesus went out of the synagogue, the place of teaching, and immediately entered the home Peter shared with others. They let him know immediately that Simon's mother-in-law was ill. Mark tells the rest of the story in very tangible detail: Jesus drew near her, took her hand and raised her. The details of this very short miracle account make a point of Jesus' attentive personal involvement with this woman. It is very little surprise, then, that the next phrase is "she served them."

As Mark introduces us to Jesus, he presents him as the victor over demons and a healer. It is striking that the first person Jesus healed was a woman — quite likely a widow and one whose social standing came through her daughter's husband. In other words, she was one of the lowly. And what do we know of this lowly woman? Only that upon being healed, she "waited on them." The word for "waited on" comes from the Greek diakoneo which we immediately recognize as the root

for deacon. It is not a common word in Mark's Gospel, in fact, it is used only twice more. After this verse, Mark 10 shows Jesus reprimanding the disciples who were seeking the first places at his right and left sides. He told them that he had not come to be served, but to serve. The only other people whom Mark presents as servers are the women who remained with Jesus when he went to the cross (15:41). Mark presents this woman, the first person healed by Jesus, as the first to understand his message and the implications of following him.

With this story, Mark has established Jesus' reputation as an exorcist and healer. The sun has set on his first day in public ministry. In the second part of our reading, people begin to flock to Jesus at night. If his first exorcism and healing were symbol of what he offered, the "whole town" who came in the night represented the world in need. This is only the first of the crowds who would press on him, seeking healing, and there is no indication that they understood the message of his presence in the way that Peter's mother-in-law did. He healed many and drove out demons, but Mark does not say that the healed people became his disciples and the demons seem more able to understand the implications of what he does than do the crowds.

That leads to the third part of today's selection. Before dawn, Jesus escaped to a deserted place where he prayed. This is the first of three times that Mark will depict Jesus at prayer. The second comes after the sharing of the loaves among the crowd in Mark 6; the third is in the Garden of Gethsemane. Mark gives us the idea that Jesus' prayer at the beginning of his ministry was a key to discerning what he was to do. He was an overnight sensation, and Peter and the disciples seemed to be ready to be his managers. But rather than defer to public expectations, rather than be caught up in fame, Jesus chose to extend his reach.

By way of explanation for his decision to go to other villages, Jesus says, "For this purpose I have come." The word Jesus used that is translated as come is more like "come out" or "come forth." This is a little like Luke's depiction of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth (4:16-30) when Jesus proclaimed his mission in the words of the prophet Isaiah. Here, Jesus indicates that he knows his purpose, he has come forth for more than popularity in a small place. As Peter's mother-in-law foreshadowed, his mission is to serve.

Planning: 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Sometimes those who serve in "background" roles in the liturgy can view their efforts as less important than the ministries of others who are clearly visible, like cantors and lectors and presiders. That can lead some to question whether what they do really matters.

It is to be hoped that planners never reach the depths of despair that Job expresses in today's first reading. It is a passage that seems to have no hope — in fact, it says so explicitly: "My days ... come to an end without hope." Maybe Job would be diagnosed today with clinical depression. Certainly, he was having a bad day, a whole series of bad days. Lectors might get depressed just from practicing this passage!

The liturgy responds to this depressing text with a psalm that reminds us that God has the power to heal the brokenhearted as well as the will to do so. This is a good reminder to all of us, lectors included, to read the whole of the Liturgy of the Word to put each part of it in context.

St. Paul speaks today about his responsibility to preach the good news, whether he wants to or not. Remember that he suffered often for doing so. Planners and sacristans and other "behind the scenes" ministers might remind themselves that they are also involved in the preaching of the word of God. That word needs to be preached in every corner of the world, but it is also preached in church to those who seek to deepen their faith. Those who prepare things for the liturgy, those who create schedules for ministers, those who clean the church and provide suitable décor for liturgy all contribute to the effective proclamation and preaching of the word.

We tend to think of preachers as those who speak the word of God to the assembly. A quote often attributed (erroneously, it seems) to St. Francis of Assisi calls us to "Preach the word always; when necessary, use words." St. Francis did preach

by his life, but he also used words regularly. The admonition reminds us, in any case, that our actions do speak and our efforts to create a space for the word to be preached and heard are important.

In today's Gospel, it is Peter's mother-in-law who provides service for Jesus and his disciples, right after she is healed. We may not often consider how Jesus and his roving band of followers found food to eat and places to stay. The Gospels note that some women provided for them. Without that kind of help, their mission of preaching would have been significantly limited.

So, whatever your contribution to the worship of your parish, remember that you are important for the continued preaching of the good news.

Prayers: 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

To those who suffer, words (and actions flowing from them) really do matter. In today's readings, God hears suffering and heals the brokenhearted. That is what Jesus was about in his ministry. That is what the disciples and all his followers have always been about. That is what we, too, are called to be doing. Hearing, preaching and living the Gospel are ultimately about life, love and healing. There are as many ways to do this as there are committed Christians.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you preached in the synagogue and drove out demons: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to live the Gospel and heal the suffering and brokenhearted: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for all who suffer in our community and throughout the world.

Minister For the church: that it may be faithful to preaching the Gospel and healing the brokenhearted at all times and in all places ... we pray,

- For those whose suffering goes beyond words and is caused by indifference, injustice or violence ... we pray,
- For those who have misused or misinterpreted the Gospel for personal or political gain; and for the courage to challenge them ... we pray,
- For those who preach the Gospel and attend to those in need, especially in difficult and challenging situations ... we pray,
- For all humanitarian organizations and programs that serve suffering people in our neighborhoods and around the globe ... we pray,
- For all who touch the suffering through kindness, companionship, generosity or any simple acts of consolation in this community and beyond ... we pray,

Presider Loving God: you have spoken to us in mercy and love throughout the ages, and you sent your only Son as love incarnate. Empower us to carry your healing message forward through our words and actions. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the divine Healer. Amen

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