

Sermon: She Began to Serve

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, February 7, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It is easy to overlook the story of Peter's mother-in-law. As we follow along the Gospel of Mark in the season of Epiphany, we reflect on how Jesus was first revealed to the world, how his ministry and his teaching continue to impact us today. In the previous Sundays, we have encountered passages on the Baptism of Jesus, on the calling of first disciples, on his proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God, and on casting out an unclean spirit in the synagogue of Capernaum. As the result of Jesus demonstrating his power and authority, his fame began to spread far and wide, throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

So in the passage this week, after leaving the synagogue, we saw Jesus and disciples kind of set up shop at Simon Peter's home in Capernaum. People from the small fishing town were bringing to Jesus those who were sick or possessed with demons. After a long day of healing and performing miracles, Jesus retreated to a deserted place to rest and to pray. The following day, they went forth to a neighbouring town, sort of 'rinse and repeat' — proclaim the good news in synagogues, healing the sick, and casting out demons.

Do you see what I just did there? I left out the story of Peter's mother-in-law. As I stated earlier, It is easy to overlook that story.

It is really not much of a story, two verses in all, according to Mark. "Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." (Mark 1:30-31). In the Matthew Gospel, pretty much the same thing, with a minor variation after she was healed, she began to serve 'him' — meaning Jesus — as opposed to serving them. In Luke version, also two verses but with a bit more colour — fever is described as 'high fever', implying the sickness was dire. Also, Jesus didn't just heal her, he rebuked the fever, and immediately she got up and began to serve them.

Otherwise, what else could we say about this unnamed woman, who was most likely a widow living under Peter and his wife's home? What else could we say about this unnamed woman whose story is limited to two verses, and never again to appear in the rest of the Gospel accounts.

It turns out this story established three distinctive prototypes — something that happens the very first time, and it sets a pattern that is to be repeated subsequently.

First, the healing took place during Sabbath. This fact could be easily missed as it is not explicitly stated, and one would need a particular keen eye to piece together the timeline. Allow me to lead you through this. When Jesus first entered that synagogue in Capernaum, we are informed in verse 21 that it was the day of Sabbath. Then in verse 29, we read that “as soon as they left the synagogue”, they (meaning Jesus and the disciples) entered Peter’s house. The final clue comes in verse 32 whereby “that evening, at sunset”, indicating the end of Sabbath, the people of Capernaum brought to Jesus all who were sick or possessed with demons. So we could conclude that when Jesus took the hand of Peter’s mother-in-law in verse 31, he did so during the Sabbath. There was no fuss, no hesitation, and no objection. This healing simply took place.

We would learn later in the Gospel, that healing on Sabbath was generally quite frowned upon by the Jewish religious authority, and it prompted Jesus to question the hypocrisy of their teaching of the Law, and to redirect us to the true spirit of the Law, that is God’s love for all of humanity.

The second prototype centred around how the healing was done, as described in the Markan account — Jesus took her by the hand and ‘lifted her up’. The word ‘lifted up’ is *egeiró* in Greek. It has a ranged of possible translations from ‘to awake’, ‘to help up’, or ‘to raise up’. We find the same verb again, much later on in Mark 16, in the account of the resurrection of Jesus, where the messenger of God assured three startled women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, in the empty tomb. He said to them (in verse 6), “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised...” — *egeiro* in Greek. So, we could surmise that in the story of Peter’s mother-in-law, the author of Mark was not simply recounting a miraculous healing of a woman saved from the brink of death, he is in fact making a direct association to the resurrection of Jesus.

This brings us to the final and the most important prototype, as soon as she was healed, she began to serve. Once again, the Scripture left us very little clues as to the manner of her service. Did she get up to make tea with a few biscuits? Did she dust up the house, prep the beddings for the new guests? Or perhaps she went about chopping up ingredients and cooking up a fabulous feast, as mother-in-laws are generally known to do? What was the manner of her service? We simply don’t know.

What we do know is the phrase ‘she began to serve’, it comes out of the root verb of *diakoneó* in Greek. Once again, the range of translations include ‘to take care of’, ‘to wait on’, or ‘to minister to’. We have actually seen this verb

already in an earlier passage of Mark 1:13, whereby Jesus “was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ‘waited on’ him.”: *diakoneó*. Given such a linkage, we come to a much fuller understanding of the *diakoneó* of Peter’s mother-in-law, which gave strength to Jesus, allowing him to minister to others, to continue the earthly ministry of Christ. Isn’t that beautiful?

In the book “Certain Women Amazed Us” (2003 by PCC), co-authored by Lois Kempla and Rosemary Doran, the stories of the Women’s Missionary Society from 1864-2002 were collected, compiled and recounted. It is a wonderful story, many wonderful stories really.

Starting from the mid-19th century onward, constricted by the theology of PCC at the time, many young women of faith were increasingly turning towards foreign mission field to fulfill their callings. Unwilling to accept simply making tea, biscuit, or fabulous feasts, and frustrated by their inability to be ordained into ministry, these women of faith utilized whatever means and accepted whatever status to serve the Church. Many accompanied their husbands into mission fields oversea. Some were commissioned as missionaries themselves. Many went with useful skills in teaching and nursing, some eventually were trained and recognized by our denomination as ‘deaconess’, a categorization of Christin ministry that stills exist in the PCC to this day. All of them serving Christ through the Church faithfully, via whatever means possible or necessary.

Dr. Pauline Brown, longtime member of St Giles, is one such missionary. She dreamed of going to India as a young girl. At the age of 25, after having served as a navy nurse, the Women’s Missionary Society commissioned her to work in India as a nurse among Bhil people. In a phone conversation I had with her a few days ago, she recounted to me her commissioning service back in 1951, where Rev. John Logan-Vencta had walked her down the aisle between pews, to front of the church. Pauline joked that it was the first time and the last time, that a man would have ‘walked her down the aisle’ in a church. She went on to devote 55 years of her life to serve God among the Bhil people, in various capacities in the field of health care and education. Though retired now, she has chosen to settle in Jobat, India, as a beloved and respected elder in the community she ministered to for many years.

She was happily surprised to receive my phone call, as I introduced myself to her. She is very pleased of the faithfulness of St Giles that many in the congregation still think of her, even though it has been more than 70 years since she has first gone to India. She is in good health, for a 95 year-old. The pandemic which has ravaged bigger cities in India, is less of a concern in her area. She asks for prayer for the area hospital she once worked in. It was temporary shutdown by the authority not too long ago due to pressure from the

nationalists, but has just been reopened last week by the order of the district court. I got the distinct feeling that Pauline played a key role in that decision. She is still quite sharp, alert, and humorous. Still care for the people she once served, once knew. She sends her greeting and prayer to individuals and families of St Giles, and hope to visit us soon.

The picture in front of the bulletin was taken only last year, by Rev. Dr. Glynis Williams, the Associate Secretary of the International Ministries of the PCC, showing Pauline visiting Doreen Morrison, also a longtime nurse missionary who served 36 years in India. Unfortunately, Ms. Morrison passed away on May 25, 2020. It would appear that Pauline's visit may have been one of the last visits that Doreen received.

Dr. Pauline Brown is not an exception to the norm, many faithful women have patterned their serving on Peter's mother-in-law, whether at home or abroad, they began and continue to serve, to minister, with little fuss or hesitation, most with little expectation of recognition, all with the heart of Christ.

I should note that since 2014, and for every three years after that, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Order of Diaconal Ministries, and the Women's Missionary Society have jointly established the Presbyterian Woman of Faith award, to recognize work of women within our denomination. There are three categories of recognition: those who have dedicated their efforts to local congregations and/or communities; those who had envisioned and launched specific ministries or projects; and those whose lifetime legacy have impacted the wider church in Canada or internationally. I believe that Dr. Pauline Brown was the first woman in PCC, among her cohort, to have received that award in 2014.

I shall conclude my reflection with the word of Jesus, in Mark 10:45, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.