

Mark 1:29-39

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Restoration

I remember the first time I read this account; I immediately noticed an undercurrent of sexism in the story. After their day at the synagogue, where Jesus cast an impure spirit out a man and left the crowd amazed at the way that he spoke and taught with authority, the disciples and Jesus trooped back to Simon and Andrew's place where they arrived, no doubt, tired and famished.

Upon their arrival they discovered Simon's mother in law in bed with a fever. At the urging of the other men, Jesus healed her and she immediately began to serve them. In my critical view, when I first read this, it appeared as though Simon's mother in law, who wasn't even given a name, was only healed so that she could make sandwiches for the boys.

It appeared to me to be demeaning and objectifying; reducing this woman to a function. It's almost as if it's an account of Jesus having to fix the toaster before they could eat. I felt a little angry that this nameless woman was lifted up only to have a boot be placed upon her.

This is similar in some ways to the story of Tabitha, or Dorcas, in the book of Acts; a woman who was devoted to good works and acts of charity. Tabitha was a seamstress, and quite a good one at that. She died, and so the disciples who were in Joppa sent representatives to go fetch Peter from a neighbouring town – the very same Simon Peter whose mother-in-law Jesus healed.

When Peter arrived, all who were gathered showed him the lovely garments that Tabitha had made, and Peter said to the corpse 'Tabitha, get up.' At this, Tabitha rose from the dead. A most impressive miracle, to be sure, but again this had the appearance of objectifying the woman who was the subject of the miracle.

Simon's mother-in-law was raised from her sick bed to make dinner, and Tabitha was raised from death to continue working as the disciple's seamstress. It's very easy to read these episodes parochially and interpret them as exemplifying the paternalistic patriarchy that many still see around them today. Certainly that was my first reaction.

But trouble comes when we read the Bible with our own viewpoint or agenda in the forefront of our minds. One of the courses that intimidates first year seminary students and fills them with anticipatory dread of their final semester is the subject of hermeneutics – in the dark of night legends are whispered about this brutally challenging course that brings otherwise bright academics to their knees.

Hermeneutics is not really that hard though – it's really just about how we interpret the things around us: the framework we hold up to the world, or the lens through which we look. The chief question that hermeneutics asks is 'Does what I bring to the Bible overshadow what the Bible is presenting to me?'

In the case of the two stories I just mentioned, Simon's mother-in-law and Tabitha, the answer is yes. My opinions overshadowed the text of the Bible when I first read these two accounts. A common perception is that the Bible and Christianity uphold the patriarchal culture of then and now, so reading with this assumption in mind makes it easy to read these stories and get all worked up and outraged.

But that would be letting ego get in front of God's word. It is an example of projecting into the text something that the text isn't really trying to say. It's my interpretation.

Reading the Bible is something that we need to learn how to do. This sounds like an odd statement, but it is true. We have already learned how to read; how to lift the words off the page and string them together so that they make coherent thoughts. But reading the Bible is more than this; reading the Bible changes us, but we can't change when we hold on to ourselves too tightly.

Let's go back to our story, but this time without judgement. Let's follow the narrative to discover what it actually is teaching us. When Jesus heard about Simon's mother-in-law, he went to her. He touched her. In this particular era it would be rare for a woman to be touched by any man to whom she is not related – either a husband, brother, nephew, or son. Jesus crossed a social boundary to be close to her. She was that important to him.

This woman was also contagious – there would be a good chance of catching a potentially fatal fever so many centuries before antibiotics were discovered. This is one of the reasons God gave his people strict purity laws about not touching the dead, the ill, mould, and many other things. In addition to violating social customs, Jesus also violated personal health and religious purity restrictions in order to heal this woman.

Imagine the scene: a quiet, dark room – a still figure on a mat. Jesus bent over her, speaking softly. He reaches out, takes her hand, and after a prayer he lifts her to her feet, healed and whole. This is not a scene of a woman being demeaned, but rather a scene of a woman being valued, being loved, and being cared for.

After this, Simon's mother-in-law responded by serving Jesus and his friends. Nobody asked her to, she lovingly served the one who loved her out of her own joyful gratitude. She showed her love in the way she knew best, and the way that she was good at.

Jesus did something more than to merely heal her. Jesus restored her. He restored her to health, and in doing so he also restored her to her place in her home. Her place in her house is where she found purpose, honour, and respect.

We might be tempted to project our current values back in time and judge her place, but we ought to be careful in doing so. If we criticize her place, and call it meaningless bondage and servitude, then we strip her of the only dignity she has, and we allow her no place at all. We would be better off saving our criticisms for the present age, where they might be put to productive use.

Jesus restored Simon's mother-in-law. He treated her with love and, in healing her, he gave her the opportunity to find her own purpose through service to those she loved. Jesus is in the business of restoration.

Jesus restored the possessed man living in the Gerasene graveyard back to sound mind, but also back to his place among the living, not among the dead in their tombs.

Jesus restored the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. In those days a woman menstruating was considered unclean and was restricted in her activities - where she could go and who she could be with. Jesus healed her bleeding, and also restored her back to full inclusion within her society.

Jesus restored the bleeding woman in the midst of restoring Jairus' daughter from death to living with her family.

Jesus restored Peter as the shepherd of his flock after he fell away and denied he knew Jesus.

Jesus restored the deaf man, the blind man, the lepers, the tax collectors, the boy with the spirit, and the woman who anointed him at dinner.

Jesus' miracles are not just about healing physical ailments, but about restoring people into their proper places: in their families, in their homes, in their wider societies, but also to their proper places in creation and in the Kingdom. Jesus' chief work was to restore humans to their ordained place in relation to God.

Sin knocks us out of alignment with God. It gets in the way, it causes us to place ourselves higher than God, and when we do that - quite literally – all hell breaks loose.

Last week I spoke about diseases, death, and illnesses of the body, mind, and spirit having their root in spiritual malaise; that is, in sin. When we are physically ill, we have a physical problem, but we also have a spiritual problem, either individually or as a people – usually both.

Jesus' redemptive, restorative actions address the spiritual illness first, and then the body and mind healing appears as a physical manifestation of the spiritual restoration. The outer, visible effect is demonstrative of what has happened inside.

Take, for example, the account of the paralyzed man in Matthew. Jesus said to him first 'Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.' It was only after some of the super-righteous among them started grumbling about Jesus taking the place of God, that Jesus responded by commanding the paralyzed man to walk.

His first concern was forgiveness – the restoration of the broken man to his proper relationship with God. The physical healing was only a sign of what was happening within, and it seems as though Jesus wasn't necessarily intending to make the man walk right away, first he wanted to speak about forgiveness and restoration, but he was forced to rush so that the man would not be robbed of his miracle of a fresh start with God by the doubt and derision of those around him.

The outward healing as a sign of inward redemption is very important to understand. Signs and symbols are indicators; their importance lies in what they signify. They are not the thing in themselves.

If a car takes the corner too widely out front of Peerless Cleaners and knocks down the street sign, that doesn't mean that Lot St. ceases to exist. The street exists with or without the sign – the sign is derivative, it is secondary. The sign only serves our convenience.

Knowing this helps us as we ask a very important question, 'Can we be restored but still wounded?' If illness is derivative of sin, then does my woundedness mean that I am not restored?

All of us carry a wound. We have physical ailments that plague us, we have mental stresses, and we have spiritual challenges. There are times that we pray and the growth disappears, the depression lifts, or prophetic words are given. There are times that we pray and it isn't clear whether there is any effect, or indeed, if there is anyone listening. What are we to make of this?

If we aren't healed, does that mean that we have been abandoned? Ultimately we will all die. Even the ones who were raised from the dead like Lazarus or Jairus' daughter eventually

succumbed to death. If we pin our hopes for salvation upon the physical signs of healing then we are left to conclude that since we eventually all die, then we all die forsaken.

But, if we see the outward signs as what they are – signs – then we can look deeper into the restoration promised by God, enacted by Jesus, and delivered by the Holy Spirit.

I think I've told you before about my friend Howard, but I'm going to tell you again. Howard was most certainly a man restored and reconciled. He was right with God, right with his family, and right with creation, but his body was a mess. Howard was riddled with cancer; he was dying.

Howard and I spent a lot of time together – we picked out the hymns for his funeral, and discussed who would speak. We prayed together, I read him scripture as his eyes were failing, and we sang. We shared memories, and hopes. Though Howard knew he was rapidly dying, he still had hopes – hopes for his wife, his children and grandchildren, hopes for his church, and even hopes for me.

Howard was a terminally broken man, and yet, Howard was most certainly restored. He was confident of his place in God's Kingdom, and sure of his place within his family. Howard exuded peace. In short order, Howard died in his wife's arms, surrounded by his family, lifted up to God in our songs and prayers.

Death is not beautiful, but Howard embraced his death with beauty and grace, and in doing so, Howard taught me something profound about redemption and what it means. Like Simon's mother-in-law, Howard was put in his place of honour and dignity.

We may not approve of the physical circumstances: Simon's mother-in-law in the kitchen, Howard on his death-bed - Jesus on the cross – but it's not up to us to approve or disapprove. Simon's mother-in-law chose to serve in the kitchen. Howard was at peace on his death-bed. Jesus was serving his father and humankind on the cross.

Although we who are on the outside may be upset, we can know that the redemptive power of God is at work if those people most directly affected are at peace. If Howard was at peace, then no matter how the rest of us felt, he was in his proper place; redeemed, reconciled, and restored.

As he lay on his death-bed, Howard occupied the place of husband, father, teacher, and most importantly, beloved Child of God.

Jesus restoration is so much more than physical healing. That doesn't mean that we stop praying for healing – not by any means. I am more than happy to pray with any of you for physical healing; not perfunctory prayers but real prayers of expectation. I don't for a minute believe that we pray in vain.

But as we pray for healing we are praying for a deeper healing peace as well. The present form of this world is already passing away. In ten days we will come to Ash Wednesday; those ashes remind us all that these earthly tents that we inhabit are only temporary as we await being built into a more permanent temple.

We take comfort in the message God gave to Israel through Jeremiah, which is for us also. 'Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known. I am going to bring recovery and healing; I will heal you and reveal to you abundance of prosperity and security. I will cleanse you from all the guilt of your sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of your sin and rebellion against me. And you shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for you.

While we eagerly await the new creation in which bodily suffering will be a thing of the past, know that in Jesus God has already made a way for you to reoccupy your originally intended place of honour, as God's own helper, tender, and co-creator along with Christ.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all today, and every day.