

Mark 1: 29-39

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

³²That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And 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. ³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸He 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." ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

A Woman's Place

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Mark 1: 29-39

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“Women should remain at home, sit still, keep house, and bear and bring up children.” – Martin Luther, church reformer, (1483-1546)

Okay. So where do we go from there? Quite the reformer, that Martin Luther was. I can't imagine what the general opinion of a woman's place was before he reformed it. What is a woman's place? Anyone out there want to hazard a guess? You'll leave it to me to dodge the bullets, huh? Okay, then, how about this:

“The female sex was made to be subjugated, and I predict that the nations of Europe will have no morals and no peace until they have put her in her place.” – Restif de la Bretonne, *La Paysan pervers* (*The Perverted Peasant*), 1775, pre-Revolution, French novelist.

No? Don't like that one? How about this one:

“A man ... must always think about women as Orientals do: he must conceive of woman as a possession, as property that can be locked away, as something predestined for service achieving her perfection in that.” – Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1886, German philosopher, son of a clergyman.

Well, now, I'm not doing a very good job dodging much of anything am I? A woman's place. A woman's place. Let's see.

How about Jerry Falwell?

“I listen to the feminists and all these radical gals – most of them are failures. They've blown it. Some of them have married, but they've married some Casper Milquetoast who asked permission to go to the bathroom. These women just need a man in the house. That's all they need. Most of these feminists need a man to tell them what time of day it is and to lead them home. And they blew it and they're mad at all men. Feminists hate men. They're sexist. They hate men – that's their problem.”

That's not doing it either, huh?

Ultra-conservative “Christian” preacher John Hagee?

God paints the portrait of the ideal woman. And he takes time to mention that she is a mother.

If the secular humanist of the 21st century ...

(By the way, I think that's us he's pointing at ...)

... took his brush to paint the portrait of the Thoroughly Modern Millie, it would be with a cigarette dangling out of her mouth, smoke twirling out of her nostrils, language that would make a sailor blush—even Rosie O'Donnell.

Her breath would smell like a brewery; a condom in one hand, and the feminist manual in the other, listing the local abortion clinics to snuff out the life that was within her body. Her allegiance is always to her career. Her children are latch-key children who come home and live alone until mother and daddy finally arrive after dark.

Women can render service in many secular fields, but God says her highest and best field, in God's opinion, is that of being a mother.

Not good, huh?

Let's turn to scripture. We'll forget about Paul for a moment. We certainly don't need to hear him telling Timothy what he thinks is God's will: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission” (1 Timothy 2:11) or reminding the Corinthian Christians of his interpretation of the law: “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

Paul is another whole sermon altogether. We'll get back to him some other time.

Let's hear Mark's opinion about the place of a woman in this world. "As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told [Jesus] about her at once."

This is the first mention of a woman in Mark's Gospel. And his is the earliest of all of our Gospels, the one book that we know Matthew and Luke relied on as an outline for their writings. And right up front, first chapter, Mark brings a woman into the story. And it's not just any woman. It's the mother of Simon's wife; Simon who Jesus renames Peter; the Rock who will hold steady the followers of later years. This is Simon Peter's mother-in-law. Perhaps if she dies, Peter will not follow Jesus, will stay home to care for his grieving wife.

But the fact of the matter is, here we are at the very opening of Mark's Gospel and a woman is at center stage. Jesus heals her "and she began to serve them," writes Mark.

In some ways, this text is contrary to our modern notion of the equality of men and women. In the story of Jesus' very first healing, the woman immediately re-takes her customary role in society. This woman's place is in the home, she's not a heroic figure trying to change the world, her faith isn't even mentioned in the story. The only real detail about the mother-in-law is that after the fever left her she got up and served them. Other translations say "she began to wait on them" or "she got up and prepared dinner for them."

So, maybe Martin Luther and the others were right. Maybe a woman's only place is in the home. Sitting still, keeping house, bearing children. Is it possible he was right? Who of you will say yes?

"The Bible and the Church," wrote American reformer and woman-suffrage leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "have been the

greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women's emancipation" (*Free Thought Magazine*, 1896).

That's a pretty daring statement, a woman before the turn of the 20th Century taking on the whole of the Bible and Christian tradition in one stroke of a pen. So now maybe we're getting somewhere. A woman's place is where?

"If women had wives to keep house for them, to stay home with vomiting children, to get the car fixed, fight with painters, run to the supermarket, ... listen to everyone's problems, ... just imagine the number of books that would be written, companies started, professorships filled, public offices that would be held, by women." – Gail Sheehy, *Passages*, 1976, American author

Okay, now maybe Martin Luther and Restif de la Bretonne and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche – and maybe even Paul – just rolled over in their graves. Emancipated women? Women authors? Professorships? Public officials? Is the Church of today out of control?

And now a United Methodist woman, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, is president of Liberia. Another United Methodist woman comes within an inch of being elected US President, ends up as Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, arguably the most powerful woman in the world today.

Like the T-shirt of a high school friend of mine said on the front, "Women belong in the house ..."; and on the back "... and the Senate too!"

"Christianity brings liberation through the Gospel in faith and action. But the Christian Church has not been a sufficiently liberating institution for women, in the sense of not opening up to them the full range of possibilities," writes Pauline Webb, internationally-known religious broadcaster, writer and ecumenical leader from London, England, currently president of *Feed the*

Minds, and one time Vice-Moderator of the World Council of Churches.

The Gospel brings liberation. That's true. We all can agree on that more or less – Protestants and Catholics, Pentecostals and Liberals, Conservatives and Progressives. Liberation is a good thing. The Gospel calls us all to free ourselves from the oppression that is around us that threatens our place as children of God.

Is it possible, though, that in Mark's story there is some message of liberation that we have for ages missed?

On the one hand, it seems like the story wants us to believe that Simon's mother-in-law got up and served like a woman of her status, once again taking her place in the culture of her time. But, in another and perhaps more powerful sense, this story opens up a whole new understanding of the world to those who truly hear it and try to understand it.

This little passage is in reality a phenomenal story about breaking rules, tearing down barriers, creating God's realm without boundaries to contain it. Jesus moves way beyond anything imaginable in this one minor healing.

The miracle in last week's Gospel lesson, the exorcism of demons from the man in Capernaum, took place inside the synagogue; this week the miracles begin in Peter and Andrew's home and spill out into the streets of Capernaum. What Jesus does is move God's authority beyond the confining religious structure of the moment. The power and authority of God's realm, God's kingdom, as shared by Jesus could not be held within the confines of any religious realm that the world had created.

Jesus enters the home of Andrew and Simon. It's still the *Sabbath*, remember. It's not until after he has brought the fever out of the mother-in-law that the sun disappears and the Sabbath is over. Jesus takes it upon himself to defy the law and perform a

healing on the Sabbath. He does it in secret – inside a private home – not in public at the synagogue or in the town square. Hindsight tells us, because we've read on, that eventually this becomes a point of contention with the religious leaders. They confront him with this blatant disregard of their Sabbath laws and eventually it is a serious charge leveled against him and brings about his arrest. Jesus has broken down a barrier and his disciples and the family have seen it happen.

Jesus *touches* the mother-in-law. First, realize that Jesus has touched a woman. And then realize that he does it on the Sabbath even. It's not enough that he should move beyond societal rules and actually, physically touch a woman, but he does so on the holiest of days.

Whenever I think of Jesus touching a woman, I envision the wedding scene in *Fiddler on the Roof* when in the midst of the hoopla and noise and music, the dancing begins and the old rabbi is enjoying himself along with everyone else until he realizes that as he is dancing he is holding hands with a woman. He stops, rattled for a moment, takes out a handkerchief, holds one end while she holds the other, and the dancing continues.

Jesus touched a woman. Unthinkable. Jesus touched a woman on the Sabbath. Unheard of. Jesus touched a woman, on the Sabbath, while she had a fever. Unbelievable.

As soon as Jesus touched the woman with a *fever*, he became unclean himself. We forget that about these healing stories. The purity codes of the ancient Mediterranean world were strictly enforced. Illness was understood as creating in a person a socially unacceptable, a devalued, state of being. If you were ill, you had a social condition that threatened the very integrity of the community. If you had an illness, you were unclean, separated from the rest of the world, de-socialized. To be readmitted to an acceptable status in the world once your disease was gone you had to submit to the prescribed priestly rituals and sacrifices. Only

then would you be clean again. Only then could someone touch you and not be defiled themselves.

Jesus didn't wait for the illness to go away on its own. He knew that the only true way for this woman to be reconnected to her family and the community was through someone breaking through the barriers and physically being present with her. He broke the rules. He acted out God's new rules.

"This is what I came out to do," is how he summarizes his presence a little later in the story. "This is what I came out to do." To break the rules. To tear down the barriers. To create new rules. To stretch the boundaries. To reconnect the disconnected. And he chose a woman to model his message.

A woman's place? Many commentators take the easy, patriarchal approach to the mother-in-law's response to this healing. They say, as I said before, that she immediately resumed her role as a cook and waitress to the men in the house, that she took on once again her submissive role in society. But what if we go beyond that interpretation?

Ched Myers in his Bible study, *Say to This Mountain*, suggests that we need a different approach to better understand the impact of this story. The Greek verb, "to serve" is the same verb that we use to get our word "deacon" – *diakonia*. It appears only two other times in Mark's Gospel. One is in Chapter 10 where Jesus tells the disciples that "the Human One [the Son of Man] came not to be served but to serve." (10:45) This, says Myers, is clearly not about fixing dinner and serving food. The service to which this verb points is clearly a deeper service to a presence more powerful than any human man.

The mother-in-law in this story *serves* Jesus – *follows* Jesus – *commits* to Jesus' teachings and message. By breaking the rules, overcoming the barriers, touching the unclean, Jesus has had a life-changing impact on this woman – and she *serves* as a result.

The other place the verb "to serve" shows up in Mark's Gospel is toward the end where he again uses it to describe women "who, when Jesus was in Galilee, followed him, and served him, and ... came up to Jerusalem with him." (15:41) From the very beginning in Galilee to the very end in Jerusalem, women were true followers. Unlike the men who so often doubted, turned away, had no idea what Jesus was doing, women practiced faithful servanthood as true disciples of Jesus. At the outset and at the conclusion of Jesus' work in Mark's Gospel, women, in a society which devalued them, created rules to subjugate them, held them down, in this world Mark presents a Jesus which gives notice that patriarchy is rejected by God and that the devaluation of women is overturned.

"Women should remain at home, sit still, keep house, and bear and bring up children," says Martin Luther. "Oh, Martin," says Jesus, "lighten up."

Perhaps it's time for the world that pretends to read the Bible to actually understand the Bible. Women in Jesus' circle of friends were the most devoted of all followers, women led those who society claimed were dominant, women created the movement which became the church. Women served. Women served God with a determination only imagined by the men of their time.

Let us follow the lead of this seemingly minor character in Mark's Gospel. Follow the lead of the mother-in-law. Women stay in your place serving God as deeply as possible; men, find a place like it and use it as a model for true discipleship.

Let Jesus heal us, and let us get up and truly serve.

Amen.