

The First Deacon

Mark 1: 29 – 39

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent
The Community Church of Sebastopol – United Church of Christ
February 7, 2021 – 5th Sunday after Epiphany

I. 3 Episodes

We're still in the first chapter of Mark and a lot has happened.

In fact, it's still the first day of Jesus' ministry and the action is moving quickly.

1. He started the day preaching in a public place – the seashore.

When some fishermen heard him, they immediately dropped their nets and followed him.

2. Then he went to Capernaum, where some of the fishermen lived.

It was the Sabbath day, so he entered the synagogue and began to teach.

The people were amazed at the way he taught, and even more so when a man possessed by spirits suddenly barge in.

Jesus silenced them with a word.

3. In today's lesson, it's still Saturday in Capernaum, and Jesus goes into the home of two fishermen who were brothers.

Living there is a woman in bed with a fever.

It happens to be the mother-in-law of Simon, who would later be called Peter.

After they tell him about her, Jesus does three things: he comes up to her, takes her by the hand, and lifts her up.

The fever breaks and she began to serve them.

Three episodes. Three venues. Three activities. Three effects.

1. First episode, a public seashore. Preaching. Fishermen follow.

2. Second episode, a synagogue. Teaching. Voices of death silenced.

3. Third episode, a private home. Healing. She rises to serve.

In each episode, the witnesses are astounded and amazed.

They've witnessed something miraculous.

II. Miracles

What is the purpose of miracle stories in the Gospels?

Are we required to believe them?

If we doubt the veracity of miracles, does it mean we don't have enough faith?

Swiss theologian Karl Barth insists that "miracle stories are designed to astonish."ⁱ

In other words, miracle stories should not be rationalized, dismissed, or believed in unquestioningly.

The point of miracles stories is to induce astonishment, “and astonishment, after all, is a blend of belief and disbelief.”

This state of amazement, which includes doubt, puts us in good company.

According to Mark, the people who experienced Jesus’ preaching, teaching, and healing were amazed.

The question of believing or not believing in the miracle stories should not be resolved.

“These stories should leave us continually ‘taken aback,’” gob smacked, startled, and somewhat disoriented.

Have you witnessed something that left you utterly amazed?

One time while in graduate school in Cambridge, MA, I was riding my bike home from class and I rode under a tree that was impossibly alive.

Streaks of red and gold shone through its shimmering leafy branches.

The tree undulated and swayed as if dancing.

And it sang with a jaw-dropping cacophony of voices.

I almost fell off my bike.

I stopped and looked and couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

If I told you that the time of day was the proverbial golden hour, and that the tree was filled with blackbirds, you might think, “Oh, well, that explains it.”

But having been there, I still can’t explain how any confluence of forces created that spectacle which astounds me to this day.

Miracles abound in every facet of life.

Relationships thought to be irreversibly damaged get mended somehow.

Stressed communities find new ways forward.

Long-held prejudices finally give way.

Technologies make possible what was once considered out of reach.

People long oppressed find ways to affirm life and create beauty.

I was listening to an interview with poet Nikki Giovanni.ⁱⁱ

She said that she thinks African mamas invented the spiritual.

The people in hulls of slave ships spoke many languages.

In their misery, there was a common language.

According to Nikki Giovanni, the mamas took the wordless moan and turned into a song.

In that way, she said, the mamas brought their people over.

As we enter this Black History Month, I would suggest to you that Black History is astounding, Black Culture is astounding, and black people are astounding, a miracle even.

III. Healing

When we hear the miracle stories of the Bible we need to pay close attention to the text because it's easy to slide into harmful theology, especially when it comes to stories about healing.

I know this because I've slid into this harm at various points in my ministry.

Harmful theology happens when we equate sickness or pain or mental illness with sinning, with blaming, with being less than.

On the other side of this harmful theology, we equate healing with believing, with deserving, with being better than.

We know very little about the first person healed by Jesus.

She is yet another woman in the Gospels whose name we don't know.

She's only identified in relationship to her son-in-law, whose name we *do* know.

We don't know her name, but we know that she is important to the community.

As soon as Jesus enters, they tell him about her.

And as soon as he hears about her, he goes to her.

And as soon as he goes to her, he begins to act.

Jesus does not introduce himself. He asks no questions.

He does not inquire about her faith.

He does not ponder her piety.

He does not wonder about her virtue.

He does not blame her for her illness.

He comes to her. He takes her hand. He lifts her up.

All strong verbs, but the strongest one is the last one.

The Greek word for lift up – *egeiro* – is the same word that describes Jesus at his resurrection.

What are we to make of this?

I would suggest to you that the purpose of Jesus' actions is not to reward but to lift up, to raise, and to restore to community.

And while her fever left her, the text does not tell us whether the underlying illness that caused the fever left her.

It's possible that Jesus "heals" her just enough so she can get out of bed.

In other words, healing need not be an all or nothing equation.

Healing happens differently for different people, and some people never experience the healing they desire.

Later in this story, Mark tells us that Jesus healed *many* who were sick and cast out *many* demons.

That word "many" is interesting. Many is not all.

I would suggest to you that the purpose the story might be to move us away from equating healing with favor.

We are to be astounded, but not assured.

The effects of Jesus' ministry, it seems, is not predictable nor absolute.

When he is approached by his new disciples with news that yet more are awaiting healing, Jesus says let's get a move on and go somewhere else.

In other words, while healing is part of his ministry, it is not all of it and cannot be reduced to it.

The signs of God's presence come in many ways, and just because healing hasn't happened doesn't mean God hasn't come near.

IV. Service

So, if the purpose of this healing story is not to suggest reward or favor, and if Jesus' acts of healing aren't assured or absolute, why does Mark tell this story?

Jesus raises up Simon's mother-in-law so that she can be of service to the community.

I have to pause here and suggest that maybe this bunch of guys could make their own damn lunch.

Maybe someone could go get her some broth or a hot toddy, maybe a fresh pillow.

Perhaps they should be taking care of the sick person rather than insisting that she get up and serve them.

Perhaps. But as Mark tells it, this woman is dear to them.

They value her and rely on her. She is an important part of their household and their community.

Jesus takes this opportunity to raise her up so that she might serve.

You might have missed it, so I'll break it down for you.

The purpose of the story is to show that Jesus raises for service.

You missed it again, so let me go into the Greek.

In verse 31, the word Mark uses for "serve" is *diakonei*, which has the same root as the English word "deacon."

This woman is the first deacon of the Jesus movement.

She is the first minister, ordained to serve on the first day of Jesus' ministry.

Astonishing.

If the purpose of preaching was to gather disciples, and the purpose of teaching was to silence the voices of death, the purpose of healing was to enable ministers to serve.

Jesus comes and touches and lifts up.

The pain might not ever go away.

The diagnosis might not change.

The test might still come back positive.

The fever might spike again tomorrow.

Nevertheless, he raised her for service.
If only we knew her name.
Maybe she is you.
Maybe you've been raised for service.
Maybe you are a deacon and don't even know it.
Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/progressive-lectionary-commentary-epiphany-5>

ⁱⁱ <https://onbeing.org/programs/nikki-giovanni-we-go-forward-with-a-sanity-and-a-love/#transcript>

Nikki Giovanni: "So we had the people coming across that ocean, not knowing where they were going, but knowing, whatever it was, they were not gonna go back to where they used to be. So somehow or another, they had to make a decision – how do we go forward? But it had to be a woman, because – we're back to the manger. We're back to Mary. We're back to that's what women do – it had to be a woman who said, 'I need to settle my people down.' And when you consider that there were a lot of languages going on – she didn't speak English, at that point. They didn't speak Swahili, at that point. There were many languages. The only common language is going to be [*hums*]. So when we get to what is going to ultimately become the United States, these people had created a way to speak to themselves, to each other, through the language, through spirituals."