

## Grace Lifts to Service

### Mark 1:29-39

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Sunday, February 5, 2006  
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Now, Lord Jesus Christ, may we hear your word; may your word and presence heal us. May we be lifted up to do the work that you have for us, as you serve us today by the power of your Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Someone carefully set the pulpit table for me this morning. I'm not sure what that really means. We spend a lot of time today in America getting ready and being hyped up for the Super Bowl. There will be a lot of food consumed. There will be a number of people preparing that food. There will be a number of people cleaning up after the guests leave. My mother, over the years, was a person who established a very strong pattern of hospitality. She loved feeding large groups. At Christmas and Thanksgiving when we gathered our family together, there would be as many as 40 to 50 people in the room, and she would feed them all. Then she would proceed to clean the table and wash all the dishes pretty much by herself. After some time, the in-laws—the women who had married into the family—began to say to the majority of the Icenogle men, "This is not a good thing."

We had been brought up to think that the women served the men. The women decided it was time to bring a change to the family, and they said, "Mom needs a dishwasher in the house—an automatic one." My Dad got wind of that, and he said, very carefully and explicitly, "We already have a dishwasher in the house, and it's Mom." In response, the rest of the women in the family immediately accosted him, and the dishwasher appeared soon thereafter.

It is important that we realize that we are called to service, but that service is not to be out of compulsion or oppression, or one-sided. Jesus heals us for service. This day in the life of Jesus, as recounted in Mark, chapter 1, began with Jesus inviting a few people to become his disciples. They go off to church at the synagogue on the day of the Sabbath, and Jesus casts out a demon and preaches. And then they go to the home of Simon, who is called Peter, and they discover that his mother-in-law is sick. Jesus immediately heals her. The point of the story is that she gets up immediately and hospitably serves those who are guests in her house.

Now, some people might see in the story a bit of chauvinism; but that, I do not believe, is what was intended. It is a clear statement that we must, at home and in the church, begin to realize that we have illness right here. We in the Presbyterian tradition call that "total depravity." Every one of us is sick in some way. Some of us are sick in multiple ways. It is not just about illness of the body, but it represents illness of the soul, the emotions, and the mind as well. We have psychological, intellectual, moral, political, financial, environmental, and cultural illnesses. Yes, we get sick in the body, but Jesus heals all illness. Part of the message of this text is that, if our disease is not recognized, if our disease is retained, then we shall not be lifted up to do service. We need to recognize our disease. It is important that if we, in fact, have a specific kind of illness that haunts us, that we come to grips with that, say "No" to it, and expect that Jesus will change us and move us into the future in a healthy way.

I believe that the National Presbyterian Church needs to be a place where we allow people to recognize their sins, to confess their sins, to deal with their illnesses and diseases, and to be healed. There is a direct connection between confession and admittance of illness, and the healing process that can occur out of recognition of that need. We are called, by Jesus Christ, into service through healing. Jesus, in this text, not only heals, but he comes to the mother-in-law, lifts her up after touching her, and, in that process of lifting, she is empowered to serve. Jesus heals us for service. Every action of Jesus to bring health to a person is so that that person can bring health to other people. There is no other name under heaven or on earth that can heal all diseases. Scripture teaches us that only the living God in Jesus Christ heals all our diseases. We are healed for the purpose of bringing service to other people.

Richard Mouw, the president of Fuller Theological Seminary, my alma mater, was speaking recently; he talked about his experience of passing through O'Hare Airport on numerous occasions, always frequenting a certain McDonald's restaurant. He would become more and more upset every time he passed through O'Hare, because the people behind the counter at McDonald's, these young men and women, would not look him in the eye, and did not treat him well. They did not treat him with glad customer service, and he became irritated by that. He was confronting one of them one day, and said, "You know, if you really want to serve a happy meal, then be happy while you're serving it." It was as if the Spirit spoke to him quietly in his ear and said, "Now, is that really the way to serve these people?" He became turned around in his own perspective and realized that they were not there to serve him, but he was there as a representative of the kingdom of God, to serve them. He talks about how he changed his modus operandi and began to smile and care for them, and treat them as individuals. Amazingly, they experienced a transformation behind the counter. I believe that this a crucial gift that we can bring to all who bring service in this culture. There is a certain demand upon people that they produce, even under oppressive circumstances, and the greatest gifts we can bring are the gifts of kindness, gladness, generosity and graciousness to those who serve us.

NPC needs to be a place where we bring that kind of spirit to those who serve us; and those who serve need to exude that kind of spirit. When that spirit pervades, that grace moves into service. We want to serve because we have been treated well, and we are called to serve. I believe that this gospel of Mark, in particular, implies that women get this message a lot faster than the men do. I believe that, over and over in the gospel of Mark, you will find patterns where the women are quickly moved to service and the men are still wondering what to do. I believe that, in this particular case, this is also true. While the mother-in-law immediately gets up to serve those in her household, what do you see the young disciples doing? They are looking for Jesus to heal more people in town. It is not for them to participate in the service, but to get Jesus to produce and heal, because, after all, that's what it's all about. I believe that Mark is saying, through implication and themes throughout the text, that we men can learn a lot from women who have quickly learned to serve.

The mother-in-law's concern was serving Jesus and the disciples. She knew immediately that her healing was an invitation to serve. We are called to serve. And sometimes, as in this text, the servants are nameless. Isn't it interesting that Simon, Andrew, James and John are named along with Jesus, but the woman is identified only as the mother-in-law? No name. How many people serve in the kingdom of God who have no name? Hundreds? Thousands? We have dozens of people who serve in this church, and you probably will not know their names because they are not visible. That nameless and faceless service is a strong part of why God heals people to serve in whatever way he has called us to do.

Another part of this service is that the older generation is called to serve the younger generation. Notice that it is the older member of the family—the mother-in-law—who serves the younger part of the family, the younger disciples. How do we feel about older people serving younger people? Jesus himself said that the first shall be last, that the greatest shall be the servant of all. Jesus turned the world upside down when he said that those who have preeminent presence, authority, and wisdom, need to serve those who lack understanding. It is important that we be a church where the older adults serve the younger adults. To turn the kingdom of God upside down the other way is to reverse the message of Jesus. I have heard too many times that it seems as if we are a church for older people rather than younger people. It is important that we send a message that younger people are welcome and we want them to be here, and that we will serve them and be gracious to them in all ways.

A part of the message of this gospel is that there is another side of service. Yes, the mother-in-law did get up to serve; but there are times that it would not be good for that service to take place, because it would have been for the wrong motivation. There is the case of Mary and Martha in the book of Luke. Martha is so busy, distracted and worried about the service and preparation of the meal for Jesus, that she reproaches her sister, Mary, for failing to help her, and instead, was sitting at the feet of Jesus and learning. Jesus clearly delivers the message to Martha: "Martha, Martha, you are distracted and worried about many things, but Mary has chosen the best way." Sometimes the greatest act of service can be sitting at the feet of Jesus and learning what Jesus wants us to do and say.

We are called to serve, but service needs some space for quiet reflection. You notice that Jesus doesn't only work constantly to heal people. There are significant periods of preparation. Jesus goes off alone early in the morning to pray and reflect, to gain some perspective and balance. And even though he is pressured by his own disciples to come back and heal more people, Jesus says, "No, I have heard a different message. We must go to other towns and proclaim the Gospel." Quiet reflection brings us to places of recovery, restoration and renewal. We discover through prayer that there are other ways to serve besides allowing the pressures of those around us to present an agenda for our lives.

We are also called to serve – and not be spectators. Today is a national day of spectator involvement. There will be more people gathered around televisions watching the Super Bowl game than participating in service anywhere all year long. We are tempted to think that the world is about our ability to watch someone else do things, and for us to sit back as armchair quarterbacks and make pronouncements about whether they are good or not. The call of the Gospel is just the opposite of that. It is a call for us to watch and learn, and participate. We become players on the field, not just twirlers of Terrible Towels. I often wonder if, in the congregation, we gave Terrible Towels to communicants, what would happen—particularly around certain points of the sermon or the worship order! No, we are called to participate, to become servants because we are healed. Paul says this: "...to present your bodies a living sacrifice, because your minds have been healed and transformed, and when you have that transformation, go out and use it. Put your body on the line."

Service is not a department of the church. Service is for everyone who declares the name of Jesus, has experienced the healing of Jesus, and then is invited to go out and serve other people. So we are called here to experience the healing power of Jesus Christ, and then to do something with it—to go out and heal other people and to serve them. Every disciple serves according to his unique giftedness. Service is also an act of preparation for leadership. Service is the key practice of developing leadership. For many years, I wondered why God was having me do rather trivial things. When I was in college, I was the sexton for a little Episcopal church; I cleaned up before and after worship services. I did the toilet cleanup. I was also the person who cleaned up the religious gathering house on campus, the University of California at Riverside; I was the custodian. After meals in the dormitory, I was the one who washed all of the pots and pans. They called me "Admiral of the Vessels." I asked God, "Why am I doing all of these menial tasks?" When I was 30 years old and had gone through the ordination process, the Lord had me out in front of a large Presbyterian church pulling out weeds, one at a time. The pastor drove by and said, "What is this? One of our candidates is out there weeding the lawn." I asked the Lord what this was about. Now I know. Because there is no way to leadership except through service.

Every disciple is called to serve before leading. We are called to serve at the table. The heart of the message of the Gospel and hospitality and service throughout scripture is the service at the table. Today we will receive communion, and it will be served by officers of the church. The message is very clear here. Officers are the first servants of the church – to care for the needs of the people, and to distribute the service of Jesus to the whole body of Christ. It is important that we never lose sight of the fact that the heart of service is the table of hospitality where Jesus provides. And it is at this table where Jesus gave of himself, his body and his blood, and he washed the disciples' feet.

Yesterday we had a group of young people at our home—mostly young people under the age of 30. We provided a hospitality moment for them. Do you know what we discovered? We had the most fun and laughter we had had in years, because these kids were funny. These young people really knew how to laugh. We served them a meal, but they served us a whole menu of humor. We learned that serving others brings good to ourselves. NPC is called to be a church of service to the city, to the nation, and to the world. Every one of us is called to serve our neighbor, our city, and our world.

It is interesting to note that Peter, the one who experienced the service from his mother-in-law early in the gospel, is the last one to understand service in the end, after the resurrection. If you look at John, chapter 21, you will find that even at the end Peter doesn't know that he is supposed to serve Jesus. So Jesus, after the resurrection, is saying, "Peter, come and let me prepare breakfast for you. Let me feed you; let me care for you, let me restore you after you have denied me." And then he pleads with Peter three times, "Peter, do you love me?" Peter responds, "Yes, Lord." Jesus replies, "Feed my sheep." Jesus asks again, "Do you love me?" Again,

Peter answers, "Yes, Lord." Jesus replies, "Feed my lambs." Jesus asks the third time, "Peter do you love me?" "Yes, Lord," Peter replies. Jesus responds, "Feed my sheep."

Do you love Jesus Christ today? Has he healed you? Then feed and serve the people around you. Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, teach us to be servants, to lay down our lives for those whom you love. In acts of service, teach us the real nature of leadership and the future of your kingdom. Now feed us your presence, your body and your blood at this table. Amen.