
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Source of Strength

A Sermon by

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Scripture: Mark 1:29-39

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Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ
555 West Glendale Avenue • Phoenix, Arizona 85021
602-264-1221 • info@beatitudeschurch.org
www.beatitudeschurch.org

♫ God is still speaking,

The Super Bowl has come and gone. The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat! Perhaps the agony was the hours and hours of pre-game show. Needless to say, I did not watch the whole pre-game show but I did catch, and maybe you did too, shortly before kick-off time, NBC's Matt Lauer's interview of President Barack Obama. Mr. President, you have been President for 12 days, you have inherited two wars, unprecedented national debt, an economy in recession, depression, oppression, and the bailout money has seemingly disappeared. Foreclosures are high, job losses are high, and swimmer Michael Phelps is high (he didn't say that! David Letterman did.) Mr. President, Matt Lauer says, let me ask the question on everyone's mind. "How's it going living with the mother-in-law?"¹ To which we all know there is really only one answer, and Barack Obama got it right, "I love my mother-in-law." As do I.

How's it going with the mother-in-law? Well, in Simon's day and Simon's town and Simon's culture, the household included the extended family. Simon was a fisherman, as was his brother Andrew, most likely sons of a fisherman father. You can imagine, can't you, that his wife and his mother-in-law kept the house, the grandchildren, served the food, and watched out their windows for the fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee. What did it mean to them when this man named Jesus came into town and took their men away? "Don't fish that way anymore. Follow me. Fish for people."

Good idea, Jesus, but who is going to feed us, pay the bills, support the children, and fix the roof?

Good idea, Jesus. Take away the wage earners from our household; leave us women and children here by ourselves to manage.

Good idea, Jesus. I know you are teaching right across the street in the synagogue. I see the crowds. I hear the people talking about demons being chased out. Who can miss all these people coming into our quiet little town? Even the Romans are stepping up their presence. Do you think there will be trouble? What have my sons-in-law gotten themselves into now? Do you think this is really 'the One'? We have been waiting so long for 'the One'.

Author Kathleen Norris who has written books like *Dakota*, and *Amazing Grace: A Spiritual Journey*, says about waiting: "None of us know what the next change is going to be, what unexpected opportunity is just around the corner, waiting a few months or a few years to change all the tenor of our lives."²

How many of your lives have been exactly as you planned them? Mine certainly has not been. I don't think I knew the possibilities that life could offer me. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" was somewhat answered for me when I was young. Nancy Nurse, my mother hoped. Or a teacher. Or the really glamorous job of a stewardess. "Coffee, tea?" From what I knew and saw in my little corner of the world, there was not a whole lot more. There certainly is now. Can I wonder, still, what I want to be when I grow up? What are my passions as I look forward? When I come to the end of my time and look backwards, what

¹ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28967411/>

² <http://koti.mbnet.fi/amoira/norris1.htm>

will be my legacy? I know what I want written on my tombstone, Psalm 50, verse 9b, Revised Standard Version, not NRSV (Go home and look it up). But what will others write of me, say of me, as they look back upon my life and my witness?

It was the Sabbath. Jesus and Simon and Andrew and James and John walked across the street from the synagogue to come home to Sabbath dinner. But dinner was not on the table. Mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. The beds were not made and the floor was not swept. “And Jesus came to her and took her by the hand and lifted her up.”

“Lifted her up”, those same words in Greek are heard again in Mark when the women go to the tomb and encounter a man in white who says, “He is not here. He is risen. He has been lifted up.”

Is Mark’s Chapter 1 the announcement we have all been waiting for? Is Mark’s urgent Gospel, ‘immediately’, ‘as soon as’, saying to the new believers “your waiting is over.” Sound the troops. Victory is here. Hope is renewed. The bad guys don’t win after all. Love wins.

Not only does love win. Look what happens next. “Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” Mother-in-law served, not as a slave, ‘Oh those lazy men, why can’t they get their own dinner?’ Mother-in-law to Simon is the first server, the first deacon, the word is diakonia. Deacon, Diaconate, Deaconess Hospital. Jesus has healed her and she knows what her response must be: to serve. “From the very beginning,” theologian Ofelia Ortega says, “she gets what Simon and the other disciples won’t understand until Easter. They did not want to become servants of each other. They did not perceive that the Son of God came to serve and give his life for all. She, on the other hand, knows it. She has overcome all selfishness and restrictive teachings and has been close to Jesus; deep down she is already Christian, diakonia, a servant of the church gathered in her son-in-law’s house.”³

You see, healing takes place not only in the synagogue, but also in the house, the meeting place for family and relatives, for guests, and for the wider community. Wherever the places are that we open our doors to one another and gather, there is the healing good news. Healing can be exploring Living the Questions, or watching the movie For the Bible Tells Me So. Healing can be a meeting in the church library or building a house in Tijuana, Nicaragua or Ora Vista development, Baseline and 16th Street. Healing can be lifting one another up, really being on one another’s team, rather than sideline judgments, pointing fingers and tearing down. One friend’s writings calls this Yesbut (resentment, arrogance, fear), Yur (You’re worthless. You’re stupid. You’re not good enough.) And Ism (racism, classism, ageism, sexism, heterosexism)

The 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, with Kevin Costner and James Earl Jones was about healing. Kevin Costner plays a farmer from Iowa who is visited by the spirit of a disgraced baseball player, Shoeless Joe Jackson. He mows down his corn crop to build a baseball diamond, in the hopes that other ex-ballplayers, alive and dead, will get a second chance and come and play the game they love. “Is this heaven?” he asks. “It’s Iowa.”

“Iowa? I could have sworn this was heaven. Is there a heaven?”

³ Feasting on the Word, p. 334

“Oh, yeah. It’s the place where dreams come true.”⁴

I wonder if Gospel writer Mark tells this story of healing mother-in-law because ‘immediately’, ‘at once’, the dream has come true. Jesus, the one who calls out the demons in the synagogues and restores people to community is also the one that lifts people up and calls them to service. Telling this story of Jesus the healer is a call to action for the people who have been waiting. Telling this story affirms the belief that the realm of God isn’t just going to happen, swoop down out of the sky, take some, and leave some behind. The realm of God is about being ‘lifted up’ and ‘serving’. The two come together and are inseparable. “There was no discrepancy between what Jesus preached and what Jesus practiced.”⁵ If only we would be accused of the same passion.

Capernaum in Galilee was on our tour. We visited the synagogue and the site identified as the house of Simon’s mother-in-law. Just above the house, a church has been built and it has a glass floor and you can look down and see the rooms of what might have been her home. On the glass floor right above the house is a Communion Table. “For Mark’s Gospel, it makes all the sense in the world to place a Communion Table over the presumed site of the first act of “diakonia”, because when we serve one another in Communion, it is an act of ministry, the building up of the local community of faith.”⁶

Our communion table sits, most often, front and center to who we are. It sits not high and lifted up, but on the same level. It sits, usually, not decorated or glitzy, but simple, ready, cleared off, uncluttered, and think about it, uncomplicated. It sits welcoming, and ready to serve, and not just a few, but big enough, sturdy enough, open enough to welcome all. Our communion table does not put up barriers to it nor guardrails around it. It isn’t inscribed with Nancy or Ted or David or Church of the Beatitudes or United Church of Christ. I think I have told you the story of my growing up church which had a fire in it and we had to rebuild the sanctuary. When it came time to choose the communion table, I remember a long, dragged out argument about whether to have it inscribed with, “Do this in remembrance of me” versus “This do in remembrance of me.” I forget who won. Maybe the words could have been, “Be lifted up” and “Serve one another”, signed, Jesus. Amen.

⁴ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097351/quotes>

⁵ *Feasting on the Word*, p. 332.

⁶ <http://atheism.about.com/od/biblegospelofmark/a/mark01e.htm>