

**The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
February 8, 2009**

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**Job 7:1-4, 6-7, 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23, Mark 1:29-39**

**There are times I wish I could canvass all of you sitting out there right after the scripture readings. I'd love to know what you actually heard before I start preaching about it. Today would be a wonderful time to do such a survey.**

**I wonder, for example, how many of you—maybe especially the women in the community—listened to the beginning of today's gospel story, and deep in your hearts heard a sigh, or felt a familiar twinge. I'm sure to some ears it sounded a lot like Simon Peter and his brother Andrew invited the gang over, including Jesus, and must have forgotten that Simon's mother-in-law was sick with a high fever. Not a prob. Jesus promptly heals her and helps her up so she can begin waiting on them.**

**Sound familiar? Like who cleaned up after the last Super Bowl party at your house? As a story, same-old, same-old! And then, since we're in a church, thoughts run quickly to...this is a typical story of how women continue to be treated in our church. There can be some strong and not-unjustified feelings aroused here.**

**The question that fascinates me is this: did we hear what Mark really wrote? Are the words his and is the sentiment really what Jesus intended? So I ask you to bear with me for a few minutes as we do a little scriptural exegesis. It won't be too heavy, but the question I'd like you to bear in mind is this: what's in a word?**

**In 1943, on the feast of St. Jerome, Pope Pius XXII published an encyclical called *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Inspired by the Divine Spirit). It has been called by many the Magna Carta of biblical scholarship. Despite a long and often heated debate, the essential thrust of the letter was confirmed by the highest teaching authority in the church; in 1965, the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* (The Word of God) was solemnly promulgated by the Second Vatican Council.**

**Both documents opened the Roman Catholic horizon on the whole bible by urging—not just accepting—newer methods of scholarship in the study of scripture. A revolution in Roman Catholic theology followed quickly. Among the things we've learned is that one cannot just listen to scripture blindly or without careful study.**

**Beginning in 1943 with that encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Inspired by the Divine Spirit), the church urged Catholics everywhere to learn more**

**about their scriptures, to study the bible, and to become more sophisticated about it. I'm afraid many of us have been remiss to this day. I remind us of all this because today's gospel is a striking example of just how a careful reading of a passage may change the entire meaning.**

**We need to know, for example, that there is little doubt that Jesus of Nazareth was widely perceived as a healer in his own time on earth. The gospels are filled with stories like today's where people flock in droves to be in his healing presence. Demons and unclean spirits are repeatedly cast out; some are sent into swine and race over cliffs; others come out violently and shout at Jesus that they know who he really is. There are some spectacular exorcisms in the gospels. And then there are the more simple "curing" stories, the very first one of which we have in today's gospel, Simon's mother-in-law.**

**What are we to make of these healing stories? Do we believe them literally? Is that the point? Some people in our own time, people of deep faith, really still wonder about what it all means—for today's life, and today's faith. Let's look more closely.**

**But we also need to know that Mark takes great pains to illustrate that Jesus was no typical miracle-worker, no simple faith healer. His healing offers are not about simple "cures", they are always about the deeper healing**

that restores people more completely to the community of Israel; they are about restoring right relationships, and welcoming back the *spiritually* outcast. Jesus' exorcisms and cures are always about proclaiming the Kingdom of God that is here, now.

Today's story, simple as it sounds on casual reading, is no exception. I ask the question again: what's in a word? Perhaps a lot. The translation I just read (the New American Bible) says: Jesus helped her up and she waited on them. The old reliable King James translation says: He lifted her up and she began ministering unto them. Does that sound different to you? It should.

The words Mark uses in Greek give a strong clue as to what is really going on here. (And certainly Mark's Greek-speaking readers would not have missed the point.) Mark says Jesus touches Simon's mother-in-law and "lifts her up." The word in Greek is *egeiren*; it is the very same word used to describe Jesus' resurrection, where he is "lifted up" by the Father. In John's gospel it is the word used to describe Jesus being "lifted up" on his throne, the cross.

This story is about much more than a simple fever-lifting and waiting on table. And the next clue comes in the word used to describe what she does

immediately after Jesus lifts her up. She “ministers to them,” serves them, waits on them. The Greek word here is *diakonei*, the same word from which comes our notion of a deacon, one who serves.

Yes, that word can also mean simply to wait on table. But it usually means much more, and there are other Greek words that more usually denote waiting on table. The “deacons” in the early Christian community served the Word and the Table (capitol “T,” the Eucharistic Table); they were administrators, and handled financial affairs; they are also described as apostles.

This is a description of significance; she was not just asked or told to wait on table. She is offered healing in order to serve the community. Far from being another example of cultural misogyny, it is a subtle proclamation of the whole gospel message: people are called, lifted up, and returned in service to others. This is God’s plan, God’s doing, God’s reign alive. This unnamed mother-in-law becomes the first disciple in a long list of followers, who is restored to her place in the community, doing what she does best in Christ Jesus: serving the needs of others.

What’s in a word? I hope a lot for you. Because this is a healing we are all offered. Such healing introduces us to the mystery and the real magic of

**the resurrection.**