

February 4, 2024

Healed to Serve

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

At a recent doctor's visit, my dad was made aware of the healing properties of elderberry syrup - his doctor recommended it and so my mom found some elderberry gummy supplements for him to try

Ever the skeptic, you could almost hear his eyes roll at the idea that some berry had any healing properties at all

After a few days with the gummies, he announced to me "I know why the elderberry gummies are so effective!"

Thinking he had done some research and curious about what he had found out, I fell for his trap: "oh really?" I said, intrigued

"They're full of vitamin C and zinc!"

Yes, I'm sure you're right dad – there must be an elderberry conspiracy out there and really it's just vitamin C and zinc in disguise! Don't be fooled! There's nothing special about elderberries.

Is there really anything out there that can heal us?

And yes, now I'm intentionally getting a bit existential because I'm leading into our gospel reading from this morning and our faith in the one who in today's reading healed Simon's mother and many more who came to him in need

Last week, Jesus called out a demon from a man in the synagogue, and this week we hear that after that incident, Jesus goes to the home of his new friend and heals his mother who has been sick with a fever

I think it's important to make a note, at the top of this sermon, about my own practice of interpreting events like the calling out of demons and the healing of the sick in the Bible, events often referred to as miracles both by the authors of the texts and by Christians through the centuries

I approach these texts in our scripture in much more a literary fashion than a literal one, and that sits well in both my Lutheran tradition and I believe in the Episcopal tradition as well (if not, I'm sure someone will tell me after the service)

What I mean by that is, I interpret healings and miracles not as literal events of someone literally having a sickness and by Jesus' touch or words that illness is totally gone

Rather, illness could really be in quotation marks as in the author is using "illness" and a person with such a thing as a symbol and foil for the love and grace of God to be made known in a moment

Last week I talked about how Mark, in having a man with a demon confront Jesus in the synagogue, gave shape and sound to the evil in the world and it was important to see Jesus' response to it – Mark personified evil in that man with a demon to show how God's love and grace are bigger than the evil that exists in this world and that Jesus came to cast out that evil

This week, Mark tells us that not only does Jesus cast out evil in the public spaces of the world, but he also cares about the relationships and health within our households and personal lives: Jesus heals his friend's mother and in doing so restores her to relationship with those around her

I interpret healing stories like the one in today's gospel reading as Sarah Henrich, Professor Emerita of New Testament, Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota interprets it in her article on this text: "It is very important to see that healing is about restoration to community and restoration of a calling"¹

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-129-39>

In being healed, Simon's mother, who is nameless, is given the chance to be lifted up out of whatever it was that held her back and make her capable once again of re-entering her household: she is restored to community

And, in that community Simon's nameless mother is able to serve

And before we get prickly that a woman is restored to health and then is able to "serve" again, I think it's important to note that Mark uses the same verb that is here translated as "serve" (*diakoneo*) as Jesus uses later to say about himself: that he came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45)

Dr. Henrich writes, "part of God's reign is the casting out of demons and the turning aside of illnesses; it has to do with restoration of those oppressed to a full role in their communities; it has to do with creating a people raised up to serve each other."

Simon's mother was restored to community and to call in the same spirit as Jesus' mission and ministry on earth and this is God's divine will, God's divine intention - and *that* is profound

Whatever "illness" she had that prohibited her from being part of the community and living out her calling, Jesus came to tear that away and to heal

And what Mark wants us to hear in this story – Mark's message – is that whatever illnesses we have that get in our way of community and calling, Jesus seeks to heal us and restore us, too

No hidden vitamin C or zinc, but the healing power of community and call, and the grace to find our ways back to them

"Jesus wields the power of God Almighty to bring about participation," Dr. Henrich writes. "It is God's will for creation to be serving in community with others."

So, how does Jesus bring about that healing? What's the path from being disconnected from community and misaligned in call, to being engaged in community and having a deep sense of purpose?

Is he walking around with some elderberry gummies in his pocket saying "take a few of these and you'll figure it out?"

Mark alludes to a healing moment for Simon's mother that shines as brightly as the great healing moment for all creation: resurrection

Let's look again at how Mark describes Jesus' response to Simon's mother: "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up."

He lifted her up – Mark is using language that he will again use to describe what happens to Jesus after he dies: "He has been raised" (Mark 16:6)

Jesus is lifted up, resurrected, and it is the great healing moment for all creation

Simon's mother is lifted up, resurrected, and it is the great healing moment in her life

Now, the thing is, resurrection implies death

But, just as Simon's mother didn't actually die before being lifted up – the way Lazarus is in his story with Jesus – I think we can put die in quotation marks, too

So, yes now we can say that "illnesses" must "die" to be "lifted up" – that's a lot of quotation marks and perhaps your mind is spinning as mine is

But, is it not true that there are things in our lives that get in our way of community? that get in our way of serving?

And, as hard as it may be, they need to be put aside, they need to die so that we might again have space to breathe

It might be a toxic relationship or a toxic habit, or it might be sin which is really all the things of this world that curve us in on ourselves in perceived safety and security rather than open us up in vulnerability, opening us up to community and calling

And the power to put those things aside, the power to let them die comes from God – comes in the form of a vast supply of love, courage, grace, freedom, forgiveness, and mercy

It comes in the form of our beloved sibling Jesus who is the one calling us and pulling us into that love, that courage, that grace, that freedom, that forgiveness, and that mercy – calling us into community and calling us into service

Our baptisms assure us that just as we have been joined to Jesus in a death like his we are joined to Jesus in a resurrection like his

And this is true not just at the end of our days, but every day – every day there are illnesses that plague us that need to be washed away, that need to die, so that we might be lifted up, so that we might be restored to community and to calling

Gosh, so much metaphor today, a lot of quotation marks – but hopefully there is some part of this story that makes its way into your real life, into your heart, and gives you permission to let go of that thing that holds you back

Trusting that it is Jesus calling you forward, and that the blessing of community and calling will hold you on the other side.

Amen.