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Take My Hand



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“He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” The healing of Simon’s mother-in-law is a great story. But there are a couple of things that I want to look at today, right near the beginning of the reading.

First: “The fever left her and she began to serve them.” She began to serve them.” There’s something about that sentence that makes modern audiences bristle. It always did me anyway. Why is the healed woman’s first response to *serve* Jesus and his four disciples? The word for “serve” in New Testament Greek is *diakoneo*. It’s where we get the word “Deacon” and most likely indicates food service, which pretty much means she “waited on” them. But that doesn’t help. Why didn’t Simon tell his mother-in-law to take it easy? “No mom, you sit; I’ll get it”

And preachers always want to try to explain away the discomfort – like preachers do. Maybe it simply means that the woman was fully healed at once. It’s a miracle! No recuperation needed!

Or: yes, she served the men, but her service was a way of showing respect and gratitude to the one who healed her; so maybe she was also serving God. Jesus always commended humble service and described himself as one who came to serve -- *diakoneo* -- a lovely and faithful response!

And the explanations continue: You see, in the honor and shame based culture of the ancient Near East, it would have been shameful for the woman in a household to neglect a guest. To feed Jesus would have honored him, but it would also have restored the woman’s own honor and dignity. Once healed, she could do what society expected from her and what her fever had prevented her from doing. She was set free!

All of these explanations are true, but they don’t really help. The woman’s *appropriate* response is to serve? Appropriate to whom? Wouldn’t true healing and liberation enable her to take on other roles? When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead in John 11, Lazarus doesn’t respond by waiting tables. He reclines at the dinner table while his sister Martha “serves” – same word, *diakoneo*. Jesus’ healing of the mother-in-law and the miracle’s outcome remain indelibly gendered, in ways that come awfully close to our own current tired and destructive male/female stereotypes.

Is more possible from this unnamed woman? Is more possible *for* her? That depends on how fertile our imaginations are. We probably shouldn’t criticize Mark or ridicule the ancient gender roles that made this story sound normal or appropriate to its original audiences (at least

to the men in the audiences). Instead, we could open up new horizons of opportunity for Simon's mother-in-law.

In seeking possibilities in the scripture itself, one might jump ahead to Mark 15. There, as Jesus' corpse hangs from the cross, Mark *finally* informs us that the crowd of Jesus' regular disciples includes more than just twelve men. We learn about a group of women who watched Jesus' execution "from a distance" while all the rest of Jesus' followers ran away when he was arrested (Mk 14:50), and the last time any of us saw Simon, he was weeping in a courtyard from guilt and shame (14:72). Not all of these women are named, so we don't know much about them. Still, we learn that they "provided for [Jesus] when he was in Galilee." The verb the NRSV translates as "provided for" in 15:41? It's *diakoneo*. Maybe Simon's mother-in-law is among the serving women who observe the crucifixion.

If she is among them, then she's more than a cook, waiter, and dishwasher. She's also a follower. If she's a follower, and a follower who is willing to serve as she goes, then she's also a disciple. And if she's a disciple, then to her "has been given the secret of the kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11).

The other part of the story that caught my attention was is a little more personal: "*He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.*"

It made me wonder what it would've been like to be her. Lying in bed, sick and at risk. Definitely afraid; because back then, fevers were serious business. Even today, they are signs of danger. But Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. And her fever left her.

It's quite moving, really. Others in the room must have felt some very powerful emotions. And I think it stirs up something primal in us as well. Think of it: How we long for Christ's presence in our moments of grief and distress. How we long for him to take our hand and lift us up, whenever we find ourselves brought low.

We see God doing the same thing throughout the Scriptures. In the Psalm today, we read that God lifts up the downtrodden – you that feeling? Downtrodden? God 'lifts up the downtrodden but casts the wicked to the ground.'

Another Psalm proclaims that "the LORD sets the prisoners free, the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down." God is not afraid to take the side of those who have no one else to help them. When we find ourselves at our lowest, when we've hit bottom, we can depend on God.

And so it was with Thomas Dorsey – not Tommie, the band leader, but the African American Gospel musician of the same name, who composed the opening hymn we just sang. It was the choir director of the church I served in West Palm Beach who first shared the story with me of how he came to write *Precious Lord*. It was after the death of his beloved wife Nettie in childbirth, and the death of their newborn son shortly after that, that Dorsey wrote the words to this beloved hymn. Later, it became an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. Mahalia Jackson sang it at Dr. King’s funeral. The first verse goes like this:

*Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home*

What a moving meditation on the Savior’s presence in our moments of grief and pain. I must confess to being a little jealous of Dorsey’s faith here -- a faith that no matter how bad things get, Jesus will lead us home. No matter what troubles we face, no matter how beaten down we are – downtrodden! -- by the world or our fellow human beings, Jesus has been there. He got there first. In the words of the great spiritual: “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows but Jesus.” If we but call on him, he will come and show us the way.

Dorsey’s words came out of the specifics of his own suffering -- deeply rooted in the tradition and historical experience of the Black Church. But, like any classic text, written from the depths of the heart, they have become universal. They apply equally at a deathbed or in prison. They can soothe a broken heart or console a grieving parent. They provide hope and strength for us in times of loss, danger, and struggle—whenever we are tired, or weak, or worn.

Jesus takes us by the hand and lifts us up, but as we talked about at the beginning, that’s not the end of the story. Remember, when the fever left her ‘she began to serve them.’ So it is with us. When Jesus heals us and becomes our Savior, we are called into service. There are times in our life when it’s enough to be near Jesus, when it’s enough just to bask in his love. But Jesus didn’t call us – and we didn’t answer -- so that we could stand around and do nothing. Jesus didn’t call us -- and we didn’t answer -- so that we could stay the same. The call of Jesus is a call to serve. Jesus himself said that he didn’t come to be served, he came to serve. When Jesus lifts us up from low places, he sets us free to serve those around us. In order for me to remain free from the bondage of self and my addictions, I have to serve others.

Think about it in terms of that hymn that we often sing – mostly because it’s another one of my favorites. “I want to walk as a child of the light. I want to follow Jesus.” To follow

Jesus means to go wherever he may lead us. He is the star who goes before us, lighting our way as we walk our life path. And we follow gladly, because Jesus has set us free.

It's not an easy path. When Jesus walked it, it led him right through the middle of the valley of the shadow of death. His path is littered with suffering, and even there his light shines, showing death to be the gateway of eternal life. With Jesus at our side, we can face even this. Listen to another verse from Dorsey's hymn:

*When the darkness appears
And the night draws near
And the day is past and gone
At the river I stand
Guide my feet, hold my hand
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.*

The Christian hope is that we can cross safely over Jordan, over the frontier that divides life from death, without fear, resentment, or regret. Our hope as Christians is that nothing—no, not even death itself—can separate us from Christ's love. We stand at the river bank with him, confident that he will lead us home.

In this hope, we can continue to put one foot in front of the other, day by day, and do the work of love. No matter what the cost. No matter how tired or afraid we may become. No matter what dangers or doubts may stand in our way. The love of Christ urges us onward. *Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.*

As we read in the last lines of the poem on the back of the bulletin, "Take my hand and with it, all I have, all I am, is forever yours."

Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Amen