

Sermon Notes - February 4, 2018

All Scriptures http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Epiphany/BEpi5_RCL.html

Scripture Focus: Mark 1:29-39, Peter's Mom-in-Law gets healed for housework ☹️

I would not blame you if you heard the Gospel and flinched. Simon Peter's mother-in-law gets healed and then immediately gets busy on housework. Long live the patriarchy! The text also seems dissonant as the Episcopal Church continues to celebrate over forty years of women's priesthood. Remember the Philadelphia Eleven? They are eleven women who were the first women ordained in the Episcopal Church on July 29, 1974, which was two years before it was official national church policy on women's priesthood.

The early disciples following Jesus were people embedded in a culture that did not value women highly. However, part of the revolution was Jesus' relationship to women. Women were leaders, followers, outcasts, socialites, and financial backers of the community that Jesus was creating. We can't put a 21st Century lens on the Gospel, but there are many, many stories about how women were part of parcel of the Jesus movement. And Peter's Mother-in-law is but one fractal of this larger picture. The whole Gospel is a stark contrast to the Roman expectations about women. So, come on a brief journey with me to the Pater Familias.

Pater Familias

It was every young boy's dream to be the head of a mini-empire with throngs of slaves and women and kids. This was true as long as that little boy was privileged enough to be Roman citizen and obviously male. The PF was a little Caesar (not to be confused with the 'pizza pizza' chain). That young boy would grow up to be the head of a Roman family and would act like a Caesar of his own domain. The Pater Familias was the oldest living male in a household and the Lord of his little "kingdom". His authority was reinforced by law and his autocratic power could be wielded on his wife and children, certain other relatives through blood or adoption, clients, freedmen and slaves.

In duty to the fatherland, Roman Paters were to raise healthy children as future citizens of Rome. They were to maintain a well oiled household and when possible to take a public role in religion and politics. The little Caesar is microcosm of society reflected in Big Caesar who ran the empire. Just as the Caesar of Rome was the Father of all, and Lord of Lords, the Caesar of his family was to be Lord of his all. This system was either a virtuous cycle of inheritance or destructive generational and gender exclusion depending on who you were.

Jesus

Jesus offered a different model. He has become the head of a multibillion member family, but even a cursory look at his life and miracles show how much was messing with the big/little Caesar model of society in Roman Palestine. He did it with some Old Testament mojo about how to treat aliens and outcast in the land. Jesus also had a vision of how his Father in Heaven was the Lord of Lords in direct contrast to Caesar. Jesus believed that all people were on the same footing in this new realm -- the Kingdom of Heaven. When outcasts are welcome, pariahs get healed, and women show up -- rage and disgust over breaking the social contract is certain to follow.

So what about Peter's Mother-in-Law?

Don't just knock these verses out of your mind because they seem to reinforce Patriarchy. Let them speak in the voice they were intended. One of my favorite seminary professors, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, who is now Dean of Seminary of the Southwest, does a great job of contextualizing this story of healing and service. Here is the whole article https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3547. But if you didn't follow the link, I want to lift one paragraph out of this article for you. She writes about Peter's mom-in-law:

Just as the demons do in the previous scene, the fever "leaves her." Having been "raised," she (Peter mother-in law) "serves" them. On the most literal level it may mean that she gets up and prepares and serves food. But the verb "to serve" is another key term in Mark's gospel. Its presence here shows that her service is to be interpreted as a paradigmatic response of faith. Meaning both to serve at a table and to do ministry, the verb diakonein is used of the angels in the wilderness who "serve" (translated "waited on" Mark 1:14) and of the women who followed Jesus and served him (translated "provided for" Mark 15:41) Serving epitomizes Jesus' own ministry: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45). She is an icon of resurrection and a paradigm of Christian ministry.

Peter's Mom-in-law is an icon for resurrection and Christian ministry for all men and women alike.

Peace, Todd

For you beautiful nerds - here are the verses about service, *διδάσκοντες*, that I talk about in the sermon

Mark 1:13

Mark 1:31

Mark 10:45

Mark 15:41

Acts 6:2

Acts 19:22

Each of these texts refer to serving and are all relate to the same Greek word!