

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | FEBRUARY 7, 2021

ISAIAH 40:21-31 | PSALM 147:1-11, 20c | 1 CORINTHIANS 9:16-23 | MARK 1:29-39

I want to start today by telling you two facts.

Here's the first fact. In the Roman Empire around the time St. Mark's gospel was written, someone's value as a person was determined primarily by their potential to contribute financially to the economy and to provide more intangible benefits to their social sphere. Because someone's value was determined by their social and economic relationships, it could be contingent on a variety of factors, one of which was their physical ability. And for that reason it was common for new parents to practice "exposure" with some newborns. Essentially, if you had a newborn child that appeared to have some sort of malady that would prevent them from earning a living or sparking joy in your life, you just left them outside.¹

If you go back and read materials from the early church, you can see the first followers of Jesus criticizing this practice and caring for infants who had been exposed by their parents because something was "wrong" with them. So one of the things that made Christ followers unique in their social context was a belief that people are defined by something beyond their ability to create value or happiness for other people. That's fact number one.

Here's fact number two. When St. Mark and the other gospel writers wanted to imagine what it was like to enter the kingdom of God, they used images. They didn't say *This is exactly what it is like*, but they said *Well, it's something sort of like this other thing*. Mustard seeds. Lost coins. Etc. Etc. And one of the images they relied on again and again was the restoration of physical, emotional, and mental ability. What is the kingdom of God like? *It's like a paralytic being able to walk. It's like a man with a withered hand being healed. It's like a woman whose bleeding finally stops*. That's fact number two.

Hopefully you can see that those two facts are in tension with one another. We often think that interpreting scripture gets thorny and difficult when it gets into money or sex or politics. But the truth is it's the stuff about ability, physical ability in particular, that is way more complicated.

Sometimes we try to resolve that tension by saying that Jesus what Jesus is really interested in is lessening people's suffering, not physical ability per se. That's certainly true to some extent, and alleviating people's suffering is obviously positive. But it doesn't erase the fact that scripture and the Christian tradition built on top of it often glosses over people's lived experience when it uses the recovery from physical disability as a symbol of spiritual rehabilitation and redemption. After all, when John Newton famously reflected back on his morally disastrous life, he could have written that he sold his brother for a pair of sandals or that he past by on the other side of the road or any of the other images of immorality scriptures gives us. But he landed on *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / that saved a wretch like me. / I once was lost, but now am found, / was blind but now I see*.²

Today's gospel reading, the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, is a good starting point to try to get past this impasse somehow. Mark tells us that "Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told [Jesus] about her at once. [Jesus] came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them."

This might seem like a weird story to use to talk about ability. After all, it's just a fever, not someone with a disability like a withered hand or someone blind since birth. A fever's just a normal, occasional part of life. But even that argument seems to reveal some of the problems with spiritualizing people's abilities. A fever is normal for us. They're normally not a huge deal. But it was far less normal for Jesus and his

¹ Brian Brock and John Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 27.

² The point here isn't that "Amazing Grace" is bad, just that it uses physical ability a way of imagining moral righteousness in a way that is so common within the Christian tradition that it's easy not to think about. It's worth reflecting on whose experiences get aestheticized as metaphor and whose don't.

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contemporaries. There's even a scene in Luke's gospel where Jesus rebukes a fever, as if fevers are caused by demons or something. If Jesus's contemporaries had a fever, they'd better get a spiritual healer who can work a miracle. But if you have a fever, you just send your friend to ShopRite to get you some medicine. Is a fever a serious problem? Depends who you ask.

One of the best books I read last summer was Andrew Solomon's *Far From the Tree*. It's close to a thousand pages, so (confession) I only got through about a third of it. But it's a reported book about the experiences of people who parent children who are different from them in some significant way and how parents build relationships with children who have an experience of life they don't have access to. And parenting children with disabilities is one relatively common experience of that.

But one of the points Solomon draws out early on is that the label "disability" depends in large part on the ways we construct and build our society. Solomon himself would have been considered disabled if he had been alive two hundred years ago, but norms and structures evolve over time.³ A fever isn't considered a major cause for concern today, but in Jesus's time it was. Sometimes the ways we describe and define normality can seem overly simplistic in hindsight.⁴

It's important to remember that when we define ability and disability in terms of people's capacity to "function in society."⁵ Because it can reinforce a tendency to see disability as inherent, something you have more of or less of, and can lead us into thinking that disability is something that needs to be eliminated instead of accommodated. After all, if someone is "unable to function in society," why do we assume there is a problem with that person that needs to be fixed before we assume there is a problem with society that needs to be corrected?⁶

And that takes us right into the healing part of this story. Mark says, "[Jesus] came and took [Simon's mother-in-law] by the hand and lifted her up." The word Mark uses here for "lifted her up" is *egeiro*. This is one of those words that looks simple in the story but is actually doing a lot of work. This is the same word that Mark describes Jesus's own resurrection. *He has been raised up; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.* And so you already get a sense here that when Mark talks about Simon's mother-in-law getting lifted up, he's not just saying that her fever broke and temperature is back under a hundred degrees. He's suggesting that her life is conveying, manifesting the kingdom of God in the world in the same way that Jesus's resurrection does.

And it's not a coincidence that since she's been raised up, the first thing she does is begin ministering to them. This can sound like she's putting the kettle on, but it's more profound than that. "Serving" here is *diakonia*, which is the same way the work of the disciples is described and where the word "deacon" comes from. It's the common mission we all share as members of the "raised up" body of Christ.

When we say in the creed every week that we believe in the resurrection of the body, that's what we're talking about. We're not saying that resurrected bodies have two hundred odd bones and ten fingers and two sex chromosomes and one liver and no fever. We are affirming that our bodies, our minds, and our selves are to conduits of God's presence in the world. We're affirming that bodies have integrity. That they

³ Solomon's disability never caused him any distress or suffering, people's attempts to address it did.

⁴ A good example of the tensions around this are outlined in Sarah Zhang, "The Last Children of Down Syndrome," *The Atlantic*, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/12/the-last-children-of-down-syndrome/616928/>.

⁵ Andrew Solomon, *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* (Simon and Schuster, 2012), 33.

⁶ At the risk of making the point twelve times, the point here is the danger of deciding what is best for people without taking their experience into account. The problem isn't just that Mark's Jesus heals people from their ailments. The problem is that Mark can seem rather uninterested in what people actually want and the lack of dialogue can be essentializing if you take it out of context.

⁷ Superfluous example, but notice that our sanctuary is built so that individuals who use wheelchairs can't serve as liturgy leaders at the altar or in the choir loft. There are relatively easy ways you could fix that, but it makes you wonder what the assumptions were during the design process in the 1950s about who would be leading liturgies.

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are defined by more than how much satisfaction they give others or how much value they produce in the economy. That whether you can function in a flawed society is not the fairest measure of whether you can flourish in the kingdom of God.

And that should put the whole story in a different light. We often think of this story as one of the first miracles Jesus performs after calling the disciples in Mark's gospel. But what else is this experience but the calling of a new disciple? If you heard a story of someone being given the power of the resurrection to engage in mission and witness, you would say it's a story about discipleship. But when the person has a fever, suddenly our brains go right to a miracle story about someone being fixed. Disciples over here. Healed people over here.

But Mark makes the nature of the transition clear. *Egeiro* and *diakonia*. Resurrection and service. Death into life. That's the transition and the redemption that occurs in the story. It's not Simon's mother-in-law being cured or fixed or made whole from her fever that is so noteworthy in the story. It's being invited into a life of service and witness. It's being lifted up. After all, that's the thing that only Jesus can do.

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