

I heard recently that there are some doctors who are making house calls again. It used to be, especially if you lived in the country as my forebears did, that health care was most often delivered at home. You thanked the doctor not only with payment, but by offering something to eat and drink. Table service was a humble way to say “thank you.” In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus makes a house call and heals Peter’s mother-in-law of a fever. She responds to her healing with some old-fashioned hospitality and table-service. Jesus heals us too, and we can also respond with thankful service.

To set the scene, it is the Sabbath day in the sleepy seaside community of Capernaum. Jesus, the guest preacher, has just woken up the congregation at the synagogue by casting out a demon. His hosts and newly-called followers, the brothers, Peter and Andrew, take Jesus home afterwards and tell him about Peter’s mother-in-law who is in bed with a fever. In those days, a fever was not simply a touch of the flu. Think malaria. Think delirious, fiery forehead, feeling-on-death’s-door kind of sick. In those days, it would not be unreasonable to think that such a fever was caused by some demonic influence. Considering Jesus’ performance in the synagogue, no wonder Peter and Andrew thought maybe he could do something for the mother-in-law.

This situation is complicated, however. First, healing someone of a fever would be considered forbidden work on the Sabbath. Later in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus will get into trouble for healing on the Sabbath. Second, imagine a strange man coming into a woman’s house and going to her bed and touching her. In Jesus’ time, such an interaction would be considered extremely awkward at best. Jesus, as a faithful Jew and a man of manners, would have been justified to say to Peter, “Sorry, but your mother-in-law is going to have to stay sick a little longer.” The situation is complicated. Jesus is a healer, and a woman is sick with fever. The conventions of religion and society, though, make a healing miracle inappropriate at this time.

The situation is not so different from our world today. Around the globe and right here in Washington, D.C., people are suffering and dying from sickness and hunger. Medical treatment in many cases is possible. Food is available. Yet, hundreds of millions of people go hungry or remain sick. The experts tell us we could feed everyone and cure a lot of people if we really tried. Although we have the means to feed and cure people, such a miracle does not happen. The reasons are complicated. Like the rules of the Sabbath in Jesus’ time, the rules of economics and global trade, the rules of social and cultural exchange, the rules that we have created to govern our interpersonal and international relations make a healing or a feeding miracle inappropriate at this time.

The situation is complicated, but the ultimate cause is simple. We were all born with a disease, a disease of the spirit, a disease that distorts our relationships with God and each other. The fever of our sinfulness, our selfishness, our tendency to prefer our way over God’s way, this fever makes us deliriously incapable of ending the hunger and sickness in our world.

Many of us have had a fever associated with a virus or infection. The aches and chills drain our energy, and we just want to stay in bed all day. The fever makes everything difficult, even just walking from the bed to the bathroom. Somewhere in the midst of the fever, we find ourselves wondering if we will ever feel normal again. And then comes the morning when we wake up after a long night of tossing and turning, of

being hot and cold, and we discover that the fever has broken. We do not feel completely normal, but the world seems brighter. Some energy has returned, and we feel like doing something. A broken fever feels like a bit of a miracle. Thank God.

Bodily fevers can be broken by rest and medicine. The fever of the spirit, the fever of sinfulness that distorts our relationships with God and each other, can only be broken by God's grace and mercy. Our inability to be in right relationship with each other and with God is what prevents us from treating the millions who suffer from malaria and HIV/AIDS and feeding the millions who suffer from malnutrition. Only God's mercy can break the fever of our spirits and help us to help each other.

We left Peter's mother-in-law as she lay sick in bed with a fever. We left the situation a little discouraged, because the rules were getting in the way of a healing. A strange man curing a sick woman on the Sabbath just would not be appropriate. But Jesus does not seem hindered by the rules that would keep a sick woman in bed. When the rules keep people down, Jesus lifts people up. He takes Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and lifts her up and the fever leaves her immediately. He breaks the rules and breaks her fever. Imagine how she must have felt! Her fever was gone. Her energy returned. The scripture says she began to serve them. She responds to being healed with a gesture of hospitality and service.

Now I have to admit that when I first heard this story, I thought that Peter's mother-in-law got a raw deal. She has been suffering in sickness, and then just as she is cured she is back in the kitchen fixing lunch! Peter and Andrew need to get in that kitchen! She does not need to be up and about. The more I reflect on the story, though, the more I see that the mother-in-law's service may be more than a sense of matriarchal obligation. She may also be serving because she has been healed. She may also be serving, because she realizes the gift that she has been given. Her fever has broken, and she wants to show her gratitude to the healer.

Jesus breaks the mother-in-law's fever, and Jesus also breaks our fever. Even though the law of sin and death says otherwise, Jesus heals the sin-sick soul with the power of God's forgiveness. Jesus takes the fever of sin and replaces it with the fire of the Holy Spirit. And even though we persist in rebelling against God, Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, breaks the fever again and again. God's forgiveness is like waking up from a long night of tossing and turning and sweating in spiritual delirium. God's forgiveness makes us feel like getting up and doing something. Like Peter's mother-in-law, we want to serve, we want to say "thank you."

But the rules of society and governments and economics, the rules and the systems that keep people hungry and sick, those rules get in our way. Those rules make it harder to help each other. But we can remember that when the rules keep people down, Jesus lifts people up. Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law even when the rules would have prevented it. When the whole town gathers at the doorstep later that evening asking for healing, Jesus does not say, "This isn't the time or the place." He goes to work, and he is calling us to go to work as the hungry and sick people of this world are gathered on our doorstep. Jesus is saying to us that we can break the fever of world hunger and sickness, because we have been broken and cured of our soul sickness. We can say thank you by serving as the hands of Christ in the world. When the rules make a miracle seem

impossible, we can challenge those rules because Christ has challenged the rule of sin and death and brought us back to health.

Today is theological education Sunday, and I want to suggest that part of learning about God is serving God and God's people. Service learning is essential for our theological education. When we serve, we can learn about God. When we offer hospitality to others, we can learn about God. When we write a letter to challenge unjust policies or to encourage our leaders to spend more money to end hunger and sickness, we can learn about God. We can learn that our God lifts people up when the broken rules keep people down. We can learn that our God does not turn away from us even though we turn away from God. We can learn about healing each other in thanksgiving for the healing we have received through Christ.

The healing of Peter's mother-in-law takes place in a private home. Our private homes are the places where we begin our thankful responses to Christ's healing power. Our private homes are the places where we begin to confront the feverish policies and practices that keep people sick and hungry. Peter's mother-in-law offered table service to her healer. Our table service begins when we sit down at our kitchen table and write a letter against policies that keep people down. Our table service begins when we table our fears and make a phone call in favor of giving people access to medical care and food. Our table service begins today at this Eucharistic table when we feed upon the amazing grace of God and we go home in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God!