

Epiphany 5B (2/4/2018)  
Isaiah 40:21-31  
Psalm 147:1-11, 20c  
1 Corinthians 9:16-23  
**Mark 1:29-39**

*Jesus has come not to be served, but to serve. And, receiving his servant care, we are strengthened to serve in his name.*

Ma chère Mademoiselle, it is with deepest pride  
And greatest pleasure that we welcome you tonight.  
And now we invite you to relax, let us pull up a chair,  
As the dining room proudly presents  
Your dinner!

Be our guest, be our guest,  
Put our service to the test.  
Tie your napkin 'round your neck, chérie,  
And we'll provide the rest.  
Soup du jour, hot hors d'oeuvres,  
Why, we only live to serve.  
Try the grey stuff, it's delicious.  
Don't believe me, ask the dishes.  
They can sing, they can dance,  
After all, miss, this is France.  
And a dinner here is never second best!  
Go on, unfold your menu,  
Take a glance and then you'll  
Be our guest, oui, our guest,  
Be our guest.<sup>1</sup>

A young prince, selfish and unkind, is cursed by a mysterious enchantress, transformed into a beast until he can learn to love and be loved in return. His castle falls into ruin, and his staff, themselves transformed into assorted household items, languish year after year without visitors to serve. Then along comes Belle, a commoner from a nearby village, and the servants fly into high gear. She gives them a purpose again. "Why, we only live to serve," the maître d' explains, overjoyed at the chance to wait on someone.

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*.

“Be Our Guest” is a great musical number, but it’s a little troubling from a socioeconomic standpoint, isn’t it? The servants’ identity is bound up entirely in their duty to provide for the needs of other presumably more powerful people. Apart from their household tasks, there is nothing to give them dignity or value. *They only live to serve.*

That’s how many readers throughout the centuries have come to view Simon’s mother-in-law in our Gospel from Mark today. **This story has regularly served to reinforce social expectations for women, relegating them to the domestic sphere.** Jesus’ healing power does not discriminate according to gender, but as soon as Simon’s mother-in-law regains her strength, she takes up her assigned duties: “Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” According to the conventional interpretation, men are called to follow Jesus, but women only live to serve.

On the one hand, this story is descriptive of its first-century context. As the senior woman in her household, Simon’s mother-in-law, and not Simon’s wife or a servant, would be afforded the privilege of showing hospitality to important guests, a privilege her illness makes impossible. So, her healing allows her to assume the place of honor she is due according to household etiquette.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, **the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law is not prescriptive, that is, it does not constitute scriptural evidence for divinely ordained gender roles. In fact, a closer look at the language of the Gospel calls into question any distinction we might make according to gender as it pertains to our encounter with Jesus and our call to discipleship.**

“[Jesus] came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” The critical word here is “serve,” from the Greek *diakonia*, or

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<sup>2</sup> Pheme Perkins, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VIII, 546.

“service.” More specifically, *diakonia* refers to table service, which illuminates today’s healing story. As soon as Jesus makes her well, Simon’s mother-in-law begins to serve by preparing food for her guests.

**Table service, however, does not refer simply to servitude, or so-called “women’s work,” but more broadly to hospitality. And, in the Christian tradition, the importance of hospitality cannot be overstated. It’s at the very heart of every Sunday gathering in Jesus’ name. Receiving Christ’s own hospitality in the holy supper, we turn toward the world to serve on his behalf.** “Pour out your Holy Spirit,” we pray, “on us and on this bread and wine, that we who share this meal may become bread for the world.” Thus, *diakonia* – table service – functions as a metaphor for any action motivated by faith in Jesus and love for our neighbors. “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,” *diakonos*. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”<sup>3</sup>

For this reason, Lutheran liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop subordinates all other symbols for Christian leadership to this fundamental symbol: “Christianity is a meal fellowship,” he insists, “and Christian leaders are table servers.”<sup>4</sup> Within this framework, therefore, Simon’s mother-in-law cannot be viewed simply as a woman relegated to a woman’s proper place. To borrow the words of one scholar, **she “interprets the gift [of healing] that she has received,” and responds with “true messianic ministry.”**<sup>5</sup> And another:

**Simon’s mother-in-law does not serve because she has to, because she is compelled to, because someone asks her to, because that’s her supposed place.**

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:43, 45.

<sup>4</sup> *The Pastor: A Spirituality*, 64.

<sup>5</sup> Ofelia Ortega, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 334.

**She serves because this is what discipleship looks like. She serves, showing us what following Jesus will really mean.<sup>6</sup>**

What's more, while his mother-in-law seems to grasp the meaning of discipleship right away, Simon and the other disciples still don't understand. They continue to squabble over which of them is the greatest and clamor for places of honor in Jesus' presence. The true nature of his call to follow is lost on them until Easter.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, we have the privilege of hindsight. We can see this healing story in the first chapter of Mark for what it is: a call to discipleship.<sup>8</sup> And so, we can see a model for our own encounter with Christ. Jesus has come not to be served, but to serve, revealing the heart of "the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the Earth," the one who "gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless." And, **receiving his servant care, we are strengthened to serve in his name, so that all the world might be made whole according to the will of God.**

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<sup>6</sup> Karoline Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5052>.

<sup>7</sup> See Ortega.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis.