

Sunday February 4th, 2024

Epiphany 5

Mark 1:29-39

“Behind Every Good Man is a Surprised Mother-in-law.”

There was a woman who had been married for just over a year and was visiting her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law noticed that the young bride was wearing her wedding ring on the wrong finger. When asked why this was, the daughter-in-law said, “For the first six months of our marriage, I wore the ring on the right finger, but after that I started wearing the ring on the wrong finger.”

“Why did you change?” her mother-in-law asked. The young woman answered, “I changed my ring to the wrong finger when I realized that I was married to the wrong man.” Now I hope with this little story I didn’t give a whole lot of people any ideas about reorganizing their wedding rings. I simply tell this little story to raise the fact that quite often when we get married, our spouses, or our marital relationship turns out to be nothing like what we imagined.

It is also true that quite often life’s circumstances go in a direction we never imagined with our spouse. How many times have we heard someone lament that their spouse was not the same person after they got married? I bet there is not one person here who is, or has been married, whose married life turned out the way they thought it would in the months leading up to their wedding day. All kinds of things can change one’s circumstances, and either enhance, or add stress to our marriages.

Employment changes, health issues, financial stress, and no one can ever anticipate how children can turn our lives upside down. I have a friend who once said, “He knew children brought changes into one’s life, but he didn’t know that so many of those changes involved diapers.” I ran across this little tidbit about marriage: “Marriage is the process of finding out what kind of person your spouse would have preferred.”

We may joke about incompatibility, or in the case of family law, “irreconcilable differences”, but the issues are very serious. Many people cope very well with having their anticipations shattered, but still there are others who cannot live with the reality of their spouses, and the death of the fantasy. And in reaction to their shattered expectations, they seek divorce, or heaven forbid even some sort of violent end to their spouse.

I raise this subject with you considering some recent court decisions regarding divorce settlements and child custody cases, but more importantly because our gospel lesson raises an interesting question. When Peter and Andrew, James, and John, left their nets and followed Jesus, what was the reaction of their families? Mark Buchanan in his book, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, imagines what it must have been like for Peter’s wife to have Peter gallivanting all around Galilee with Jesus and leaving her alone.

I cannot this morning retell Buchanan’s work, but suffice it to say, I believe it could not have been easy for her.

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It must be very difficult for the rest of the family when one member makes a commitment to follow Jesus. Perhaps some of you in this room today have experienced this tension and maybe you still are to some extent.

All of us know people who have spent years delicately balancing their family life with their religious convictions. So, are there lessons we can learn from Peter's experience? Well let's look closer at our lesson for today. It all begins after the worship service on the Sabbath when, as we examined last week, Jesus healed a man of demon possession in the synagogue. The whole town was buzzing with rumours and excitement about Jesus.

Now I know there were practical reasons for Jesus to go to Peter and Andrew's home after synagogue. Jesus needed a place to stay and some food, so Peter offers hospitality. Now, it is not quite clear whether Peter knew his mother-in-law was sick before they went to his home, but the issue was front and center when they arrived. Some scholars at this point like to stress that family dynamics were quite different in Jesus' day.

Not only were woman considered second class citizens, a widow, as Peter's mother-in-law is assumed to be, were considered by many as an unwanted burden. As a widow, Peter's mother-in-law would have no source of income, and what is interesting is that normally a widowed mother went to live with her son's family, as it was his responsibility.

We can assume therefore, that she had no sons, or they were unable to care for her. So, without any other options, she comes to live with her daughter, Peter's wife. The home in question would have been Peter's family home, and being the older brother, it was probably left to him. Andrew was likely still a resident of the home because he had yet to become married, but we do not know this for sure.

I know I am in great danger of reading a bit into this passage, but I cannot help but think, that Peter and Andrew wanted the family to meet Jesus, so they would understand their decision to follow him. Maybe the family was in an upheaval over this disruption of their neatly ordered lives, and Peter sought some resolution to the problem. If we know anything about Peter at all, it was that he was impulsive.

Peter said, and did things often without thinking, and we have gained a great deal of spiritual insight because of his impulsive nature. Maybe this intension to follow the Galilean preacher was just one more impulsive action. I can imagine Peter's wife, and mother-in-law, rolling their eyes with that "Here he goes again" look, and this time he has dragged Andrew along with him.

Questions may have abounded about who was going to fish to make money, and let us be honest here, if Peter is traveling around with Jesus for weeks at a time, Peter's wife would get lonely. Sure, she would have her mother and maybe children, if they had any, but it just isn't the same as having the strong forceful Peter, she had come to love and depend on. The healing of Peter's mother-in-law may have been an act of mercy for more than one reason.

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Not only did the sick woman have her unnamed illness relieved, but I suspect that Peter's household would have had to acknowledge that maybe Peter and Andrew weren't so foolish after all. Perhaps there was some truth to what Peter had been talking about when he said that this Galilean was indeed the Messiah.

The plot surely thickened when the sun went down. I remind you again that this trip to Peter and Andrew's home was immediately after the Sabbath service at the synagogue. Peter's mother-in-law was healed on the Sabbath, which as we see later in the gospels was real issue for the Pharisees. Once the sun went down, however, the Sabbath was over, and the locals began to arrive at Peter's house on mass.

The people of Capernaum had been present when the demonic man was healed at the synagogue, and so they were anxious to have Jesus heal their sick friends and relatives. They waited until the sun went down because the Sabbath would be over and there would be no prohibition against the physical work of carrying their sick to Jesus. Jesus responds with compassion to the crushing needs of the humanity at Peter's door, and maybe now Peter's family begins to see what Peter's excitement and commitment all are about.

When the crowds had been satisfied, and the household retired for the night, Peter and his wife must have engaged in some serious discussion about the events of the past few days. Perhaps she was overwhelmed, and I am sure she had tons of questions, but the die had been cast, and Peter was about to become the "Rock" on which much of the world's faith and practice was to be built.

Salvation therefore comes to Peter's home in response to Peter's radical obedience to Christ's call; the call being, of course, to become "fishers of people". All of this raises the next lesson for Peter's family and all of us by extension.

What is the nature of this enterprise to which Peter is being called. The scripture lesson continues in telling us that very early, before the sun was up, Jesus went away to pray. Mark tells us that he went away into the "wilderness," which is a bit odd. You see the area around Capernaum is hardly a wilderness. Josephus the historian, tells us that at this time, this area was fully cultivated, and had a high population.

So why say wilderness because Jesus didn't go miles away? Mark is making another point about the nature of Jesus' work. The word wilderness harkens back to the introduction of Jesus' ministry in Chapter 1:2-3 and also to Jesus experience in the wilderness being tempted. In Mark's account the nature of Jesus' work is hammered out in the metaphorical "wilderness" or more literally in isolation and in prayer.

Biblical scholar William Lane points out that Mark is perhaps indicating that the crowds at Peter's house drove Jesus into solitude. That perhaps, the clamoring crowds seeking healing was a temptation leading Jesus to abandon his true mission. The same mission Peter was being called to. Healing ministries are very popular and draw huge crowds, as we see at modern day rallies by Benny Hin and others.

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Seeing people healed of all manner of infirmity is very exciting. To be able to do such a thing or to be associated with someone who could heal, would surely lend some prestige and authority to a person. The gospels are full of people seeking relief of their immediate physical needs from illness to even hunger. Who wouldn't want to follow someone like Jesus who could heal and feed multitudes?

However, and I think many people need to hear this point clearly; Jesus' mission was not to heal as many people as possible. That is not why he came. The healings were a sign, or a side effect, of the greater kingdom work going on. So, when Peter finds Jesus, and tells him of the crowds longing to see him for further healing, Jesus responds with a defining statement of his purpose.

"We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too, because that is why I came." Jesus' mission then was to preach the Kingdom, meaning that he was to go about calling people to decide about the claim of God on their lives. Jesus' focus was on the spiritual condition of the people he met; a point underscored by a reference in verse 39 that Jesus is mentioned expelling demons along with preaching, but no mention is made of physical healing.

The same point is being made in Luke 5 in the story of the paralytic man who is lowered through a roof to be healed by Jesus. What, is the first thing Jesus says to him? Verse 20 reads, "Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." It is only when the Pharisees accuse him of being blasphemous that Jesus heals the man of his paralysis.

Once again, as I stated last week, the problem of humanity lies within the souls of people. Certainly, the pressing immediate needs, of our physical natures, requires attention but of primary importance to Jesus and by extension for his church, is care of the soul. In the midst of physical pain or suffering or even emotional pain, all we want is relief. Just as the paralytic man sought; however, the greater need is the soul.

Tony Campolo tells the story of a street person who was standing on a corner of Wall Street in New York City begging for money. Reaching out his hand, he pleaded with passing corporate executives with the words, "Change? Change?" The story goes that one executive responded with a very pained expression on his face, "I'm trying! I'm trying!"

That's the point of Jesus ministry; change: change of allegiance, change of purpose, change of heart, and change from death to life. This is what Jesus preached about, and what he wanted his disciples to understand, and what was built upon the "rock" that Peter represented. There is no place for the status quo in God's kingdom, and Peter eventually understood this change meant leaving his past life and moving on to more important matters but what about his family?

What should be our response when the work of Christ brings change to our loved one's lives? Thankfully we know what Peter's wife's response was.

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In 1 Corinthians 9 the Apostle Paul is defending his authority as an apostle and his companion's rights to live as normal lives as possible, when in verse 5-6 appears these words: *Don't we have the right to bring a Christian wife along with us as the other disciples and the Lord's brothers and Peter do? Or is it only Barnabas and I who must work to support ourselves?*

It is clear from what Paul is saying that Peter's wife became a part of his traveling missionary group. At some point in Peter's transition to apostle, his wife embraced the change, and the mission Peter was called to. She was still a fisherman's wife but now the prize catch was people, not bass. I am sure like many since who have followed their spouse into Christian service, she had her struggles and her questions, but she saw the greater prize.

I am beginning to think that Peter's wife had a profound impact on Peter's thinking and in reading 1 Peter 3:1-7 I can't help but wonder if these words are a tribute to the woman who stood with him and journeyed with him for Christ. Peter wrote to wives in general:

Don't be concerned about the outward beauty that depends on fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. You should be known for the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God. That is the way holy women of old made themselves beautiful. (Vs.3-5)

So, while it may be true that behind every good man is a surprised mother-in-law, it is also true that behind every good servant of God is a spouse who possesses enough faith to see the hand of God on their beloved and willingness to join the great adventure God is calling us to.