

The Gospel of Mark, generally moves at a pretty fast clip.

There's a pretty compelling theory that this writing was originally a script

Meant to assist oral recitation or performance.

What we read today, packs a lot of action into three paragraphs, 11 sentences, 199 words.

The Book of Mark also begins with a lot about healing.

Religion and healing have a complicated relationship.

There is a great and laudable legacy of people of faith seeking to bring healing into their communities. In the first centuries of the Christian Tradition, in a time in which health care systems were not as we know them today, churches and monasteries were places where people could go when unwell to find help.

This legacy becomes complicated in the last few centuries as church run hospitals become sites of horrific acts.

Faith healers who pick up on stories like these of the sick and possessed being brought to Jesus have made exorbitant sums of money leaving behind collateral damage of human bodies and souls languishing in shame.

I am not going to try to disentangle all of that this morning, although how the Christian Tradition relates to bodies, wellness, ability, illness, fragility and mortality is an interesting and important question.

I've been thinking of healing in another sense in pondering these texts.

We see in Mark's Gospel, not only human bodies seeking healing, but a sense of community longing for a new wholeness. Community struggling amidst a challenging moment in their history, strained relationships, inequality, fear, suspicion, and we get the sense that these episodes of individual healing can also be read as a longing for healing in this sense.

The Hebrew phrase Tikkun Olam - to heal or repair the world - speaks to this.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him

about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

This picks up “as soon” as the previous section in which Jesus has come to the synagogue, on the Sabbath (which puts this episode also on the Sabbath) where he is encountered by a man with what the text names *an unclean spirit* which Jesus commands leave the man alone.

And then they arrive at the house of Simon and Andrew (we met them in the readings two weeks ago | find a sermon on them [here](#)) where Simon’s mother-in-law is unwell.

There are many cases of unnamed women in Scripture who have been given a name by tradition but Peter’s Mother-in-Law is not one of these, which is a shame.

She is unwell, in bed with a fever (this episode when retold in Luke names it a *great or high fever*).

Jesus takes her hand and she is healed.

...and she began to serve them.

This is a line that irks me, and I promise we’ll come back to that.

Jan Richardson offers a very generous reading:

Here we see the domestic Jesus, the intimate Jesus. Crossing from the house of worship into the home of Simon, standing at the bed of a woman whose body has been disordered by illness, Jesus conveys with his outstretched hand that there is no sphere that he will not engage, no suffering that is beneath him to heal, no place where he does not desire wholeness and peace. He makes clear that his power is present in every realm, the home no less than the synagogue. He extends his healing to all, the woman in the grip of a fever no less than the man in the clutch of an unclean spirit.

There is no place, no person, unworthy of a miracle.

I want to come back to the gendered treatment of Peter’s mother-in-law (whether we read that onto the text or whether it is inherent) but first, I would like to ponder Richardson’s reading of Jesus in this passage.

Domestic.

Intimate.

Bodily connection.

The episode in the synagogue that immediately precedes this is much different.

...there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, 'Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'

This is a confrontation with noise and shouting, and titles and rebuking.

Peter's mother-in-law however is lifted up by a hand.

Incidentally, when Luke writes this story, Jesus speaks rebuke to the fever rather than offering physical comfort.

The synagogue healing happens, it feels, in a flash.

The healing in the home, feels much slower.

It's not good hermeneutic to transpose modern gender analysis onto ancient text, and doing so, has often been part of the problematic trend of reading Christian text in a way that leans into anti-Semitism.

But I think we can bring gender as a lens to the text, especially when we keep front of mind that we are reading a translation and that the cultural assumptions of the time of translation are as present as those of the time of writing.

The text itself has no qualms with Jesus bringing a level of tenderness into this exchange, Jesus has no issue here dwelling in a more intimate or domestic milieu, and at least in Mark's rendering, no issues embodying tenderness in contrast with the confrontation of the previous episode.

Now the first part of this passage ends...

...the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

This is often understood to mean that she prepares a meal even though the text does not explicitly say so, and doubtlessly, her gender is part of this (again this is as much about what assumptions we put on the text than anything inherent in the text itself).

Now a positive reading, if that is the case, is that we have this beautiful reciprocation of nurture.

Healing linked to feeding is ubiquitous... any nutritionist or public health students who are in the Zoom coffee time can go on about that.

There is also much that could be said about the psychological value of food and mental well-being.

And not just the food itself, but the act of eating together.

This is of course, one of the really disappointing things about this time of pandemic. I certainly can count on my fingers the number of meals I have eaten with people beyond my family since last March and they have been tricky affairs of picking up separate orders of take out, carefully divided dishes, labelling which small bowl of salsa belonged to which family.

So instead, we have relied on cooking extra portions and dropping them off on the porch of those we wish we could gather with around a table.

The slowing down and intimacy of the shared meal, is most certainly part of its healing potency.

The connection between food and health is of course one of the reasons why unequal access to nutritious food along economic or racial separations (which usual means both).

Tuscarora writer and editor Alicia Elliott writes powerful about the connections between poverty, colonialism, access to food, and shame. In her powerful book [A Mind Spread Out On the Ground](#) she notes:

There's a certain shame in learning about [nutrition] when you're poor. Teachers who preach the gospel of the food pyramid assume that if you're eating unhealthily, you have a choice. That if you're eating unhealthily, it's entirely your fault.¹

Christianity of course has been and continues to be, all too often purveyors of shame served as a side order to go along with dominant narratives or normalcy, holding up healing in our sacred texts and liturgies while promoting an implicit message of self-sufficiency, uncritically dispensed without recognition of the structural factors that define who has access, a structure the church so often defends and upholds.

So, there is something powerfully sacred in reading this healing episode ending with a meal.

Now, the text of course does not name food.

Now the Greek word translated as "serve" is diakoneó (dee-ak-on-eh'-o).

This is incidentally where the term Deacon comes from.

Or Diaconal, as one of the forms of Ordered Ministry in the United Church, Diaconal Ministers.

These are important terms.

Many versions use the word *minister* instead

¹ <https://www.chatelaine.com/living/books/alicia-elliott-a-mind-spread-out-on-the-ground-excerpt/>

Then the fever left her, and she began to minister unto them.

“Diakoneó autos” will appear on the first Sunday of Lent.

When Jesus is led into the desert during a time of temptation and preparation.

Angels will Diakoneó autos/minister unto him.

So, this can be read to mean a ministry of feeding and encouraging.

But also, we can remember the important leadership that Diakoneo connotes within the writings of the early Christian Community.

In the book of Acts, it is the people who are called the Diakonia who will organize the redistribution of wealth in the community ensuring that the impoverished are cared for.

One intriguing reading links this sentence to the next paragraph in which the whole city brings those who are sick and in pain seeking healing.

Such a reading imagines that as the people come seeking healing, it is Peter’s mother-in-law who ministers by organizing and caring for those who are seeking healing.

So that the diakoneo that she offers is cooking or food preparation is not assumed.

But if it is to be understood as cooking, in the language choices and the repetition of the angel’s description, there is no denigration or diminishment of a ministry of feeding.

This episode, immediately following on the previous in the synagogue, of course happens on the Sabbath, and to this day the mitzvah of lighting the Shabbat candles in a Sabbath observing Jewish home to this day continues to belong to women.

And again, while we do well to avoid imposing modern gender analysis directly over Ancient text, it can be a powerful tool through which Scripture can be a mirror showing us truth about ourselves and our world, in this case, challenging us to recognize how much powerful personal and communal healing is possible as rigid impositions of constructed norms fall away.

Our instinct in churches, I believe is to read ourselves into these texts, positioning ourselves with next to Jesus or the disciples, but I wonder, if perhaps we do well to read ourselves into the communities, who look for and long for healing. The people in the synagogue, the members of Peter’s household, the crowds who gather as sunset falls.

These texts invite us to ponder how we engage in our own authentic healing, working with that within and around us, that within which we find ourselves intertwined that calls for healing in our world – that calls for Tikkun Olam.

How might we attend to healing – personally, communally, imaging it structurally – understanding healing as a vocation – a beckoning human persons and relations towards wholeness.