

Rising to Serve

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Mark 1:29-39

Isaiah 40:21-31

The situation of women called to offer care through service has varied from time to time and place to place, but it has never been easy. Hear these words from Langston Hughes, in a poem published in 1951, and entitled “Where Service is Needed”. He was writing as the legal color bar in the field of nursing was being dismantled state by state.

*For the Negro Nurse there's been no easy way.
The bars have been high, the day a long day
When the hand that could tend the sick or the hurt
Must also combat Jim Crow's dirt.*

*No caution, no gloves, no antiseptic, no mask
Could protect her from prejudice as she stuck to her task....*

*The bars have been high. There is no magic wand;
Only unity and faith have brought this new dawn
Where the rights of democracy to all are ceded:
Her skilled hands may serve where service is needed.*

(Extracts from the complete poem printed in *The Collected poems of Langston Hughes*, Rampersad and Roessel, Eds. 1994.)

When Jesus came to the home of Simon and Andrew, in the town of Capernaum, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, in one compassionate gesture he performed a healing and he called one more disciple: we don't even know her name—only that she was the mother-in-law of Simon Peter. Here in the first chapter of Mark's gospel is the story of one who may have been the first woman Christ-follower. It is short on historical detail, short on any detail. All we know, in essence, is that one Sabbath, we find the newly called disciples—there are only four named at this point-- coming back with Jesus from the synagogue to the home of two of them, Simon and Andrew. In the house is a woman in the grip of fever, Simon's mother-in-law. But Jesus helps her rise, healed, and right away she starts to *serve*. Short on detail, Mark is able in a few sparse words to describe the scene: ***“And he [Jesus] came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them.”***

It is tempting to shake our heads when we read this story—poor woman, hauled out of her fever-soaked bed, only to have to rise and wait on a bunch of men. But wait a minute. Lay aside your preconceptions. If we read back just a few verses, we find out that service—in the sense not of forced labor but rather the labor of love that is the work of hospitality, is the work of angels, and it is the work of Christ himself. The special word for *service* used of Simon's Mother -in-Law is only used a few times in the whole gospel of Mark. One reference is just a few verses back in Chapter One, where we find angels caring for Jesus in the desert: here we find it translated “minister”. The word is *diakoneo*—and from it we

get the word “Deacon” in English. This is service of both the humblest and the highest order—the holy work of healing and hospitality.

One writer has remarked that the apostles didn’t get who Jesus was until after the resurrection. But this unnamed woman, first to be healed in the gospel, is also first to get the essence of what Jesus is up to. She gets it right away—as she rises up from her fever, she rises not to revel in her own recovery but to offer a little of what she has received, to the others in her path. She rises straightaway to the work of Christlike service, this first woman to follow Jesus, the first deacon, if you will. She makes a radical move. She translates her own healing into action on behalf of her neighbors. Don’t you wish we knew her name? But think of all the women whose names we don’t know who have followed her, for whom there has been “no easy way” but whose “skilled hands have served where service is needed.”

Some years ago, Catholic mystic activist scholar pastor Henri Nouwen wrote a book entitled *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. The essential premise of the book is that the capacity to minister, to offer hospitality, service, to respond to our neighbor in love, comes not from strength but from vulnerability, not from perfection but from recognition of the woundedness we carry in our own souls. “A *shared* pain”, he writes, “is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing, when understood as a way to liberation.” He goes on, “Hospitality becomes community as it creates a unity based on the shared confession of our basic brokenness and on a shared hope.” (Nouwen, *Wounded Healer*, p. 93) What a radical notion—we don’t have to get perfect or be experts to offer very human healing, reconciliation and hope of liberation. We just need to be willing to share from the soul and serve our neighbors. We just need to be willing to let ourselves be gently lifted up and out of whatever it is that makes us feverish, whatever self-absorption or solitude, whatever condition, spiritual physical or social, and turn, turn again, to share our basic busted beautiful humanity.

The communion table to which we come represents the power of the wounded One to heal. When we share the bread in broken pieces and we share the cup of a holy life poured out in hope of a new liberating reality for all of humankind, we don’t do so on the basis of righteousness or strength, but rather as a sign of the solidarity of God with humanity. And somehow, somehow in these moments, if we let ourselves, we can be drawn together, in all of our imperfection, with all our differences. Somehow as we share bread with each other, we can taste a sacred hospitality that turns our isolation into community and our despair into hope.

You and I live in a competitive world of high expectations and little room for forgiveness. As we gather in this place we sense however the presence of one who reaches to us wherever we are, and gently helps us to rise up. This is one who give us permission to let the paralyzing wounds that we work so hard to hide and that are forever holding us captive—let them not so much disappear as to be faced and healed, healed enough to become the mobilizing wounds that allow us to step into fuller community with each human being whom we encounter.

This presence, this Spirit of Jesus, is not alone of a faraway time, and place. This One stands today in the midst of us, extending a hand yet pierced by human cruelty and oppression. Christ still takes us by the hand, still sees the places of brokenness, of paralyzing fear, of solitude. When Jesus invites us to rise we can and often do experience healing—not necessarily a cure, but healing, healing enough to reach for our neighbors’ hands, and inquire after their condition, and sometimes, sometimes even to act in concert to turn the world upside down. Can you accept the outstretched Christ hand? If not directly, well, there is another option. There is a nameless woman next to you or perhaps a little behind, just beyond your peripheral vision. The word is she can explain to you what it means to rise up and serve, no longer captive, but free now, free to offer love, free to share the healing. The word is she can reach out a hand too, to raise as she has been raised, to heal as she has been healed.