

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
February 4th, 2024 - The 5th Sunday after the Epiphany

Serving with Excellence and Care

In the name of God: Father Son and Holy Spirit; the one Lord and mother of us all.

Wes Dubic, our seminarian, called me on Friday to say he was feeling awful, that he'd been to Urgent Care in Delafield and that he'd tested positive for COVID. He was very sorry to miss giving his second sermon among us. Prayers if you are watching from home, Wes. And prayers for you all, as you're now stuck with me reflecting on short notice.

I want to take just these first few verses from Mark's gospel about Jesus' healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law. One of you recently pointed out something incredibly obvious in these verses that I had never thought of. This person had been raised in the Roman Catholic Church where all the priests were "single" and where he was told that to truly be a minister of the gospel one had to forsake traditional family life. But at some point this person was reading this passage, and a light bulb went off: wait a minute, in the story Simon Peter has a mother-in-law? You only get a mother-in-law if you are married. Simon Peter is kind of a big deal in the Church; he's given the keys to the kingdom, he's the Rock on which Jesus will build the whole thing. Hmmm. Any way, that's just a little aside. There is a lot more than just Simon Peter's marital status. Listen as I read it again and try to imagine the scene.

"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. Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them."

Mark tells us that the men in the family have been together with a couple of friends at a church meeting. They come in all excited from their evening at the synagogue. They're hungry and they've brought another friend with them. The woman of the house is down with a fever and now her son-in-law is bringing home a hungry group from the church meeting. Perfect.

Then Jesus enters the story. He takes the feverish matriarch by the hand and lifts her up. In the process, she is healed, made whole. And then it's this next part that kind of catches us up short. When she gets up out of bed and waits on them. Like seemingly right away. Like the men need their chips and salsa right now. It's no secret that ancient culture was super-charged with patriarchy, so that's certainly at play here. And those of us raised in Christian traditions similarly charged, might have an especially strong reaction to that phrase. But take a breath. There is more going on here.

The word for "serve" used here is the Greek is *diakonos*, which literally means "to wait tables" to serve food. But the word *diakonos* meant much more to the early Christian community. The word is all over the gospels.

In the first chapter of Mark, he uses the same word to describe the way the angels ministered to Jesus after his forty days in the wilderness. They took care of him, they ministered to him. This is the same word Jesus uses to capture his own ministry when he says, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (to *diakonos*) and to give his life a ransom for many.” Jesus tells his followers this life of service was to be at the very heart of their calling as disciples.

Diakonos gives us the name for the sacred order of Deacons, those like Deacon Nancy called into a special vocation of service. But in many ways, just as there is a priesthood of all believers, so are we all called to be deacons.

So when Simon’s mother-in-law begins to serve, she’s shown to be a faithful disciple of Jesus. There is also a connection between service and healing, wholeness. Like Jesus touches her, and then says gently to her “Rise and serve, not just for the sake of others, but also for your ongoing, deepening wholeness.” And Jesus says this not just to Peter’s mother-in-law in the story but also us. It’s as if we need to serve not out of obligation to God and others, but for the healing of our own souls.

Arthur Brooks teaches at Harvard. He’s written 12 books and he writes a regular column for the *Atlantic*. Brooks looks at the data on human well-being, on the ingredients that seem to go into constructing a deeply good life. He’s a very spiritual person, a devout Roman Catholic. He goes to Daily Mass. Last May he gave the commencement speech at Catholic University in D.C.¹ Facing thousands of soon-to-be graduates, Brooks spoke about work and what brings joy, what brings a sense of well-being, what brings a deep satisfaction. He said the 3 most common pieces of advice around finding a career are all actually terrible. First, people say, “If you find a job that you love, you’ll never actually work a day in your life.” This is just completely false, and it sets you up for misery, thinking something is wrong when all those days come along when things are just a long, hard slog.

The second piece of advice is another recipe for disappointment. “Go find a job that helps save the world.” No pressure there. Here’s a secret: the world is not ours to save. It’s God’s world. We are trying to make our tiny piece of it a little more good, a little more true, a little more just and beautiful. As the prayer attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero says, “We are the workers, not the master builders; ministers, not messiahs.”

And of course the third piece of terrible advice is to go for Money, Prestige, Admiration. No, No, and No, says Brooks. When you look at the data around what gives people deep satisfaction in their work, and this work could be a traditional job, but it could also be volunteer work, work

¹ <https://communications.catholic.edu/news/2023/05/arthur-brooks-tells-graduates-love-others-and-be-excellent.html>

in the home with family members. I would sum up all the research as 1) pursue excellence and 2) serve others.

To pursue excellence is to pursue a high standard with one's work. Now some people get their buttons pushed with excellence, especially if they tend towards perfectionism. Excellence is not about perfection. To pursue perfection is to pursue an impossibly high standard, and to be perpetually anxious and disappointed that you cannot meet it. When one pursues excellence, one knows there will be mistakes, missteps, wrong turns, outright failures, and this will not spoil things, this will be a part of growth. Excellence is all about the process: bringing care, attention, craft. Perfection is concerned not with the process but with a flawless end-product, in other words an illusion.

The second ingredient in finding joy is to serve others. Brooks never uses the Greek, but it is clear: out of the data comes *diakonos*. He said to these graduates, "Dedicate anything you do, big or small, significant or insignificant, to the good of others." Serving the task or the person in front of you with excellence stands out in a world increasingly cynical, increasingly less warm, less human.

I recently called AT&T to check on the family's cell phone rates. And I so much hate calling ATT that I don't do it. It's like even if I know I can save \$600 by getting 2024 rates vs. 2021 rates, it's not worth having my soul crushed by this enormous machine. But I finally did it last week. And I spoke with this woman, her name, believe it or not, was Jelly Rose, I know because she told it to me AND it was on the post-call survey texted to me. And Jelly Rose was quite remarkable. She was warm, she was highly competent, she was reassuring, she guided me through all the people I needed to talk with to change both the internet and cell plans. She joked with me about her Indian accent. She offered excellence and care, and it was so rare I can't stop telling people about it.

May we be like Peter's mother-in-law, touched by Jesus to serve, touched by Jesus for *diakonos*. May we day by day renew our own calling to excellence and care, whether we are in finance or retail or healthcare or grandparent. When you come to the communion rail and you receive the body of Christ, perhaps you might offer not just a prayer of gratitude, but also a prayer of dedication. "Thank you for your healing touch, Jesus. Continue to heal me through my own *diakonos*, through my daily, sacred offering of excellence and care." Amen.