

*With Everything You Have at Hand*

Mark 1:29-39

February 4, 2018 ~ Communion Meditation ~5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

**Introduction**

Our Gospel reading begins where you left off last Sunday. You may recall that Jesus had gone to the synagogue to teach on the Sabbath and ended up exorcising an unclean spirit (or spirits) out of a man inside the synagogue. This sabbath day is far from over. It turned out to be one of those very long and intense days that will not let up. I'm sure you've had them too. Today we swoop back into the story at the point that those four X-fishermen: Simon and Andrew, James and John, take Jesus over to the house of Simon and Andrew, where Simon's mother-in-law could give them a place to kick back after their big day at the synagogue.

But that is hardly what happened. Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. She is seriously ill. And Jesus' day of healing on the Sabbath is not over. This brief healing story (it is 2 verses long – if you blink, you will miss it) is found also in Matthew 8 and Luke 4, adding import to its place in the larger Gospel Message. Perhaps there is more in this story, than meets the eye. Mark's stitching this story together with two other seemingly unrelated snippets adds to the curiosity and pushes us to wonder: what is here for us to notice? What is the message these stories proclaim? Let's begin at verse 28, as it helps set the context for our Gospel reading today.

**Sermon**

Greatness. What makes a person great? What makes a country great? As debatable and political as this question has become these days, we are not the first to be asking it. Of Jesus, Mark writes, "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." Jesus was trending without the help of YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, or even electricity for that matter... by evening we hear that "the whole city was gathered around the door." Jesus' greatness was on the rise. His disciples were excited, this fish-for-people business was *way* more exciting than all that net mending and fish cleaning. "Come on Jesus, let's get out there and do some more healing. We're lovin' it!"

But Jesus has a different teaching about greatness; and the disciples were not getting it. As great as healing people with afflictions really is, his primary message was not about becoming a famous healer, even though that was something he had the power to do. Rather, our unlikely example of greatness today, is Simon's mother-in-law, the one whom Jesus took by the hand and lifts up. We don't know her name, nor does she say a word in this story. She doesn't need to. Her greatness is revealed by what she does in response to what Jesus did for her. The more we think about this story, the more we see.

This tiny two-verse healing story is also the first resurrection story in Mark's gospel. The verb Mark uses, translated "to raise up" is the Greek word for resurrection. And her action response, "to serve" them embodies the very heart of Jesus' message. She was raised up, resurrected from her life-threatening fever and in response began to serve them, in the only way that she could. About this woman, Jan Richardson, artist, writer, and minister has written, "Whatever she may have said, if anything, the act of her serving Jesus and his companions, her ministering to them in this basic, bodily way, provides eloquent testimony in the vocabulary she had at hand. It is a sermon in supper: she is lavish with the language that she knows, using it to proclaim and give praise for what Christ has done." <sup>i</sup>

James and John seemed to chafe against this alternative model of greatness all the way to the very end. Ten chapters later, in Mark 10:35-45, just a couple days before Jesus would enter Jerusalem and be crucified, James and John are still itching to hitch their wagons to Jesus' star, and make a bold request: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." (10:37). To which Jesus responded: "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant... For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45).

Where can we find this Jesus-style greatness today? One place is the Ritsona refugee camp in Greece. Yes, this raising up by the hand of God, from death to life, to serve others, using what we have at hand, is what I see happening in a story of Syrian and Kurdish women who began weaving welcome mats, a two-foot-by-three-foot floor covering woven from discarded materials, including parts of the life preservers that refugees had worn on their voyages across the Mediterranean. When the first one came off the loom, writes Amy Frykholm, "the women were jumping and shouting and hollering and crying and laughing." <sup>ii</sup>

Each of these nine women in the weaving circle had lost everything when they left home; they were among the 80,000 refugees from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and other countries who had requested asylum in Greece. The idea of a refugee-run economic enterprise of weaving mats, using discarded life preservers, blankets, and mountains of donated clothing was the idea of Becca Stevens, an Episcopal priest in Nashville, TN who wanted to develop a social enterprise for refugee women that was practical, sustainable, and inspirational. What if they took the life vests that they wore on their harrowing journeys and turned them into welcome mats?" Bringing this idea to life took multiple steps and numerous hands across two continents, yet as Stevens observed, "All we had to do to start this process was get some looms and material and sit in a circle." Observing them at work, she saw them coming back to life.

Another place a little closer to home where greatness as Jesus defined it occurred was at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City on November 18, 1995. Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, came on stage to give a concert. As Rabbi Jack Reimer tells the story, "If you have ever been to a Perlman concert, you know that

getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child, and so he has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches. To see him walk across the stage one step at a time, painfully and slowly, is an awesome sight. He walks painfully yet majestically, until he reaches his chair. Then he sits down, slowly, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play.

By now, the audience is used to this ritual. They sit quietly while he makes his way across the stage to his chair. They remain reverently silent while he undoes the clasps on his legs. They wait until he is ready to play. But this time, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap – it went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. There was no mistaking what he had to do. People who were there that night thought to themselves, “We figured that he would have to get up, put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches and limp his way off stage to either find another string for this one.

But he didn't. Instead, he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began, and he played from where he had left off. And he played with such passion and such power and such purity as they had never heard before. Of course, anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night, Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them that that had never made before.

When he finished, there was an awesome silence in the room. And then people rose and cheered. There was an extraordinary outburst of applause from every corner of the auditorium. We were all on our feet, screaming and cheering, doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done. He smile, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said – not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone – “You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.”

iii

For Christmas this year my sister Lynn, inspired by this story created a quilt for our 94-year old mom on which she embroidered in very large letters, “Make Music With What You Have.” When I arrived at mom's Assisted Living Unit after flying from here to Philadelphia on January 23, it was after 9 pm, four hours past my much anticipated arrival time. She knew I had missed dinner. Sure enough mom had scrounged some fruit and crackers from the nurses and managed to pick up the key for my guest room. I was struck by how in this small quiet way, after years of preparing lavish welcome dinners, and making up guest bedrooms whenever one of her children came to visit, she was using what she had at hand to, “make music with what she has left.”

Perhaps you wonder what you have to make music with at your stage of life, or what we have to make music with as a mainline church here in 2018, or as a country with our government hamstrung by bitter partisan polarization. The Good News of Christ, the Message that Jesus lived and preached, opens a different path to greatness within reach for all of us who dare to embrace it.

Do you want to be great? Do we want to be a great church? I wonder how God is calling us to use what we have at hand to help our church, to help our community of Marshfield, our state of Wisconsin, to help our nation, America, become greater, in the eyes of Jesus. Itzhak Perlman with just 3 strings, the Ritsona refugee camp women with discarded parts of life preservers, and Simon's Mother-in-law, making music, weaving, serving: they are each sermons about service to the God of Love, made visible in Jesus, who gave everything for each of us. That's the greatness to which Jesus calls us.

The path can open with a small move. A piece of bread and a sip of wine can bring us back to the center of who we are in God's eyes. Yes, with what he had on hand, Jesus gave us a "sermon in supper," the night he was betrayed and arrested. It was about the greatness of sacrifice and the power of Divine Love to heal and to resurrect: individuals, communities, nations, even this whole world he came to save. And to this table, this day, we are all invited.

---

<sup>i</sup> Jan L. Richardson, *In the Sanctuary of Women*, (Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN, 2010), pp.222-223.

<sup>ii</sup> Amy Frykholm, "Weaving New Lives," *Christian Century*, January 3, 2018, p. 32.

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi Jack Reimer, "Perlman Makes His Music the Hard Way," King Features Syndicate, *Houston Chronicle*, February 10, 2001,.