

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
Epiphany 5 - Year B
February 7, 2021

Mark 1:29-39

After Jesus and his disciples 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.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

In-Laws

The stories we have about Jesus include all kinds of people who are a part of the narrative. We have the main personalities of the Gospels, the disciples, some of whom we know well and others whom we would struggle to name. Then we also have those who are, seemingly, on the fringes of the story. They encounter Jesus and his ministry briefly. They are often unnamed in the text itself. It's easy to gloss right over them and to see them as footnotes that can be ignored while we are getting to the heart of the Gospel. This week, I find myself drawn to this kind of person in our Gospel reading today.¹

Our text begins by saying that Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew. Then we hear that "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." That's Mark 1:31-32, and that, my friends, is the only direct mention of Simon Peter's mother-in-law in all the Scriptures. You just heard it. That's it.

¹ This sermon was inspired by a friend and professor, The Rev. Dr. Rob MacSwain, who wrote on this topic for *The Living Church* website:
https://livingchurch.org/2020/12/30/barkless-dogs-and-apostolic-sacrifice/?utm_source=The+Living+Church+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=3c41ca4f20-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2021_01_26_08_29&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_0826f52b83-3c41ca4f20-128533794.

Fascinating, isn't it? This week, I find myself reflecting deeply on these few lines of Scriptures, on the fact that Simon Peter has a mother-in-law (meaning that he was married), and -- to be honest -- I find myself reflecting on in-laws in general. Here, like many of you, I have discovered at least one thing that I have in common with St. Peter which is that we both have our wife's mother in our lives and at least sometimes in our homes. I may have empathized with Simon Peter before with all of the struggles that he has had to know who Christ is and follow him to the cross. I may have empathized with this guy before, but now I can assure you that I know something of his human condition. Not only do I also have a mother-in-law, but like Simon Peter whose mother-in-law shows up in the Gospel record, who is a part of Simon's life's work, if you will, I have in-laws who are likely watching this sermon live on Facebook right now!

Think about that for a second, how many of you in your careers ever had your in-laws show up to watch you work? How many of you all had to perform the duties of your vocation, not just for your employees or clientele, but also for the parents of your spouse? Peter finally gets Jesus to come hang out with him in his crib and his mother-in-law gets all of the attention! Hey, I'm just saying that Simon Peter's mother-in-law may have the fever this morning, but Peter and I, this isn't easy on us either. We're the victims here, really.

As you can tell, I thought a lot about in-laws this week and I have even done some scholarly research into the topic. Sometimes I turn to the patristic period for wisdom. Other times I research what a modern theologian might say about a topic. This time I found myself investigating in-laws through the TV show, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, which ran from 1996-2005. (There was even a moment this week when I was watching a clip of the show in my office at the church and I thought, "You know, if a parishioner walks in right now and see me on my computer, they just won't appreciate the level of intellectual curiosity that I bring to my sermons.")

It's hard to imagine a better example of the dynamics of family -- in laws in particular -- than *Everybody Loves Raymond*, where Doris Roberts and Peter Boyle play Raymond's parents who live across the street from Ray and his wife. In one episode the main couple goes out to eat with both sets of parents (or in-laws) as well as Raymond's brother played by Brad Garrett. The dinner at a fancy French restaurant is a complete disaster. Raymond's mom cannot make sense of all the silverware on the table so she hands it to the waiter so they won't have to wash it later. Ray's in-laws keep talking about trips to France which Raymond and his family have no appreciation of until, finally, Raymond tells his in-laws exactly what he thinks of them and the dinner unravels completely. When they finally get home, Raymond's parents, who at the dinner were as difficult as you could imagine, lay into *him* for how *he* behaved. The scene climaxes when Doris Roberts, who really is the best actor in the show, says to her son with

disappointment, “I thought you knew more about what being a family meant. I mean, what would happen to the world if everyone told their families what they actually thought [of them].”²

Yes, this Gospel reading reminds us that family dynamics are as old as Eden, and that Jesus enters into our families, enters into our most complex relationships, to offer us healing and hope. The first thing we can take away from this Gospel reading, is that Simon Peter -- the Rock upon whom Christ built his church, the first bishop of Rome, the first Pope according to the Roman tradition -- he was not a celibate man. Peter was married and likely had children. In case you think that he might have been a widower, there is one other passage in the Scriptures that says otherwise. It’s actually in 1 Corinthians, in this same conversation we heard a portion of this morning, when St. Paul defends his own apostolic ministry. He apparently is getting flack for his continuing to work for a living unlike other apostles and for his celibate lifestyle. Paul says, “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Do we not have the right to our food and drink? Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of our Lord and Cephas?” (1 Cor. 9:1, 4-6). Many of you will know that Cephas is the Aramaic form of Simon Peter, so here Paul confirms that Peter not only has a wife but that she was a companion to him in ministry.

Think about this for a second: when Jesus entered the home of Simon Peter and his wife, he brought in his person this message that the Kingdom of God is going to redefine who we are and what we do. It’s going to change how families function, how they fight, how they forgive, how they love. This woman, Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, reveals to us that there were real people and real relationships that were changed by someone becoming a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. I mean, what did Simon Peter’s wife do when he left their home for three years to follow this Jesus around? How did the children get cared for and what did they think? How did the bills get paid when he was following Jesus? Perhaps that was when his mother-in-law moved into his home. You can imagine how that phone call went when Simon Peter’s wife called her mom to tell her that her husband left town with some backwoods rabbi who kept on talking about loving your neighbor. “What about loving your wife?” she exclaimed!

And yet, our evidence from Paul’s letter shows us that, in time, she became a companion in ministry, an apostolic aid if not an apostle herself. Jesus enters into our families, redefines our most complex relationships, changes how we love one another, and invites us into a bigger family. It’s a transformation that is not without cost. We can remember those who have a call to intentional Christian community -- who, like Jesus and Paul, forgo starting a family to join their monastic brothers and sisters -- they remind us of the cost of following Jesus and how it changes us and the relationships we value the most.

² See *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Season 1, episode called “In-Laws.”

Here's another thing about Simon Peter's mother-in-law. She exists -- in these couple of sentences about her -- as a counter narrative to just about all of the disciples proper in Mark's Gospel. We may not know her name. We may not know her full story. But we do know that in Mark's Gospel especially, the disciples whom Jesus calls -- the Twelve -- are especially dense. In Mark 8, it boils over when Jesus finally asks them, "Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" (Mark 8:17-18). All of those signs and miracles, all of those lessons, the carefully crafted sermons, the teachings and healings, it's like the male disciples just don't get it.

Simon Peter's mother-in-law, on the other hand, saying nothing to her, Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up. He physically, emotionally, spiritually *lifted her up*. Unlike her son-in-law and so many of the men in the Gospels, our mother-in-law this morning knows she is not well and she receives the healing touch of Christ Jesus. She refuses not the Physician's cure. And then what does she do? She begins to serve them. Or, as the King James translates it, she *ministers* to them all. It's the same word from which we get "deacon," as one who serves. Our mother-in-law gets to work in ministry: welcoming, feeding, offering hospitality, sharing God's warmth. In Mark's Gospel, she is the first minister of Christ we hear of and she reminds us of what happens to us all when touched by Christ. Then she reminds us of what we do next as individuals and even as a world struck by fever. Like our mother-in-law today, Christ is lifting us up so we might minister to him and in his name.

Maybe -- perhaps -- I guess that in-laws are not that bad afterall.