

JESUS' SECOND HEALING PETER'S MOTHER-IN-LAW

(09/19/2021)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 1:29-39
Matthew 8:14-17
Luke 4:38-41

“He [Jesus] came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.” (Mark 1:32-34)

This morning, in addition to the scripture lesson from the Gospel of Mark, we also listened to parallel passages from the gospels of Matthew and Luke. We note that the three passages are practically identical. This can help us understand why biblical scholars believe that both Matthew and Luke had a copy of Mark's gospel before them when they compiled their own.

This morning's scripture lesson is the account of Jesus' healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. I have a special feeling for this passage of scripture for several reasons.

The first has to do with my training at the C. G. Jung Institute of Boston. I won't bore you with the details of my arduous journey to become certified as a Jungian psychoanalyst, but the last stage involved the writing of a thesis. My paper was entitled *The Chinese Legend of the Rainmaker of Kai-Chou: A Quantum Field Theory Approach to Understanding the Dynamics of Transference and Countertransference in Jungian Psychology*. The paper incorporated the insights of quantum mechanics, theoretical biology, chaos theory, and Jung's thinking about synchronicity and the objective psyche into the analysis of an ancient Chinese legend, and it attempted to draw out the implications of this for a post-Freudian understanding of transference and counter-transference dynamics in the analytic setting.

By the way, this fancy title really *was* the title of my paper. Sometimes, as you may have noted, I make things up. This, however, is a true story. Unfortunately, my thesis committee refused to accept the paper because “it was not Jungian enough.” I had previously shared the paper with nine different analysts who thought it was excellent and encouraged me to publish it. My wife, by the way, also encouraged me and is still encouraging me to publish it. In her words, “Success is the most satisfying form of revenge.”

When I realized that a paper that I had been working on for five years was never going to be accepted by this committee, I packed it away in a box and wrote a second, more traditional thesis. Apparently, religion is not the only field of inquiry where one runs up against the restrictive dynamics of orthodoxy. Then again, maybe the members of my thesis committee didn't like me. This explanation was especially puzzling to me—the possibility that they just didn't like me. After all, what's not to like? Please, put your hands down! That was a rhetorical question! And, at least in this church, you are not supposed to answer rhetorical questions!

My second thesis was entitled *The Archetype of the Mother-in-Law: A Study in the Process of Transformation*. I had been working on this topic for approximately ten years. Every

time I came across information about mothers-in-law, I filed it away in a briefcase. So, when the time came to write the paper, I had all the material I needed. This one took only a year to write. Its acceptance by a different committee enabled me to sit for my final exams, which I managed to pass. But that's not the point.

C. G. Jung would tell us that the mother-in-law falls into the category of an archetype of the collective unconscious because the legends, traditions, and superstitions regarding this relationship are cross-cultural. Both the wife's and the husband's relationship with their mother-in-law are often fraught with conflict. The way we deal with this conflict can lead to regression, e.g., to conflict and even the breakup of one's marriage, or it can give rise to growth and transformation.

The mother-in-law has been held up as an object of scorn in a way that would be deemed politically incorrect were it applied to any other group of people. Although marriage and family therapists agree that, at least in our culture, a woman's relationship with her mother-in-law is usually more conflictual than a man's relationship with his mother-in-law, I found it interesting that all the so-called mother-in-law jokes are told from the perspective of the man.

By the way, I can honestly say that I have no idea how the psychological dynamics of mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law work with gay or lesbian marriages. A lot of psychological research and insight into psychological dynamics that hold true of heterosexual individuals and couples may not fit neatly across the broad spectrum of sexual orientations, gender identities, and also racial factors, all of which fall somewhere along a spectrum. Many of us long for the good old days, the days when ignorance, denial, or the projection of the shadow led us to put people into such nice, neat, bifurcated categories, those good old days when our low level of consciousness led us to deny the amazing diversity and complexity of human beings, those good old days when, as God intended, a man was a man, and a woman was a woman, and that's that.

In the course of writing my thesis, I amassed a collection of over forty mother-in-law jokes, probably the largest collection in existence. If I ever decide to become a stand-up comic, I would have at least one routine ready to go! I know what you're thinking: if I decide to be a stand-up comic, I probably shouldn't give up my day job. But that's not the point.

This theme has been an important part of my personal life and growth. After a shaky start, my mother-in-law and I built a wonderful relationship. I loved her very much, and I miss her. Those of you who were privileged to know Darlene's mother would agree that she was a very special person. Darlene also had to overcome some initial difficulties to build a relationship with my mother. Through these relationships, which evolved and deepened in love throughout the years, Darlene and I grew as people.

I have found that this is often the case. Most people do not hate their mother-in-law. So why do mothers-in-law get such a bad rap? In jokes, literature, and even music, they are depicted as evil. In the rock and roll song "Mother-in-Law" which came out in the 1960's, we are told that she "comes from down below." In the course of my research, I discovered a country

and western song entitled, “If You Want to Keep the Beer Cold, Put it Next to my Mother-in-Law’s Heart.” That’s one of my favorites!

I can’t resist telling you just one mother-in-law joke from my collection.

A man was playing golf one day when he noticed an unusual funeral procession passing by. First came the hearse, driving slowly. Walking behind the hearse was a man with a very large German shepherd dog on a leash. Following close behind the man and the dog was a single line of approximately two hundred men.

The golfer walked up to the man with the dog and asked him what was happening. The man replied that the funeral was for his mother-in-law, who had been torn to pieces by his German shepherd. The dog, although normally gentle and loving, apparently had an irresistible urge to kill mothers-in-law.

“Gee,” said the golfer. “Any chance I could borrow your dog for a day or two?”

“No problem,” said the man, “but you’ll have to go to the end of the line.”

As I mentioned, there is no other family relation or social group that is submitted to this level of verbal abuse by stand-up comics. I once saw a camera shop that posted the following advertisement: “Shoot your mother-in-law.” I am aware that many women not only *have* a mother-in-law, they *are* a mother-in-law, and are sometimes the recipient of this archetypal hostility from their sons-in-law, their daughters-in-law, and even their own sons or daughters when their sons or daughters don’t have a mind of their own. But that’s not the point.

From our scripture lesson this morning we learn that Peter had a mother-in-law. This means that Peter had a wife. Fortunately, there is no other way you can get a mother-in-law. There I go again, parroting the stereotype with my use of the word “fortunately!”

Everyone knows Simon Peter’s name; no one knows the name of his mother-in-law, though I believe that she had a profound effect upon Peter and the history of the early church. In fact, I believe that the Christian church was born with the healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law.

Peter’s mother-in-law is ill. We are told that she has a fever. She is hot. She is burning up. It is possible that she is suffering from a conventional malady. It is also possible that her bodily suffering had a psychosomatic etiology.

Her encounter with Jesus occurs shortly after Peter has become one of Jesus’ disciples. Peter has just walked away from the woman’s daughter and grandchildren to follow an itinerant preacher. Could it be that Peter’s mother-in-law is a little “hot under the collar?” She may be feeling rage toward her son-in-law for abandoning those whom she loves more than anyone else in the world. She is probably also angry at Jesus. If this is true, then her healing and what follows the healing becomes even more significant.

Jesus, by the way, does something either stupid or caring and courageous. I think it was caring and courageous. Jesus enters the house of a sick woman. He risks ritual uncleanness as well as the risk of catching this woman's disease, if, indeed, she is suffering from something other than her anger at Jesus and Peter.

Jesus takes Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and lifts her up. The very next sentence tells us of her remarkable response. According to Mark, the woman "begins to serve them." The Greek verb for "serve" is *diaconeo*, which is the root of our word "deacon."

Some modern feminist theologians might argue that this healing simply returns the woman to a place of subjugation in a patriarchal society, that it leaves her in the kitchen serving men. I think this is a superficial reading of the text. I suspect that Peter's mother-in-law was filled with gratitude at having been touched and healed by Jesus. He may have saved her life. I believe that her response, serving Jesus and the disciples, was an expression of this gratitude.

Peter's mother-in-law's healing and her response may have freed Peter to follow Jesus. Peter might have found it difficult to leave his wife and children if his mother-in-law had not willingly made a commitment to watch over them. Even Peter's wife would have been hard-pressed to object to Peter's decision to follow Jesus after witnessing the miraculous healing of her mother. These two women, Peter's wife, and his mother-in-law, probably gave Peter their blessing.

Years later, there are hints that Peter's wife may have accompanied him on his apostolic journeys. As recorded in 1 Corinthians 9:5, Paul says,

This is my defense to those who would examine me. 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 the Lord and Cephas?

This suggests that Peter's mother-in-law may have still been taking care of his family when Peter, accompanied by his wife, assumed a position of leadership in the early Christian church.

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law at the very beginning of his ministry. It is interesting that her response, her example of service, becomes an integral part of his message. Three years later, when Jesus gathers with his disciples in the Upper Room, he performs the work of a deacon. He serves. He provides the meal. He washes his disciples' feet. He tells them that they must become

like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22:26-27)

Every fall we hold our annual stewardship drive. We traditionally celebrate Stewardship Sunday on the Sunday preceding Thanksgiving because we feel that Thanksgiving and

stewardship go together. We are convinced that both Thanksgiving and stewardship find a common grounding in gratitude.

In the seven churches I have served as interim or settled pastor, I have seen several different approaches to stewardship. Some, quite honestly, struck me as slick. They were professionally packaged. I experienced these approaches to stewardship as highly manipulative. In one of these churches, several “stewardship visitors” would “visit” each member of the church family, engage the family in prayer, and then ask them as a family to fill out the pledge card in their presence. I had the feeling that this church didn’t believe in the saying “Freely you have received from God; freely give.” If you don’t trust that people will freely give, you will try to find ways to manipulate them.

Different people would describe our church in different ways. When it comes to change, the word “glacial” would come to some people’s minds. We do not rush into things in this church—but when we finally get around to doing something, we do it right. There are other adjectives that would capture the essence of our church, words like “spiritual,” “community of faith,” “caring,” “hard working,” “deeply committed,” and, of course, “the little church with a big heart.” I don’t think anyone would describe us as fancy or slick.

Each fall, we ask people to support us in our mission. I usually preach a couple of sermons about stewardship. I send out a letter to everyone on our mailing list. The Stewardship and Growth Committee also sends out a letter. Sometimes two or three of our members take a moment during Sunday worship to share what this church has meant to them and their families. Then everyone fills out the pledge card and either puts it in the offering plate or mails it in.

This approach to stewardship isn’t slick; it isn’t fancy; but it has worked for 155 years. We are still here. We can do this because people remember.

Every single person who is in church during the stewardship season, everyone who receives a letter, everyone who is asked to share his/her time, talent, and treasure with this church has received something from this church. They may have attended worship. They may have participated in one of our study groups. They may have read my Keeping in (Virtual) Touch reflections or the sermons that are posted on our website. A pastor of this church may have officiated at their wedding, baptized their child, or buried their parents. They may have received counseling from a pastor, or their children might have attended our Sunday school. With every single person, our lives have intersected at some point.

If you are a part of our church family, this little church has been there for you when you needed us. What we gave to you, we gave freely. All we ask is that you remember, and that you respond out of a feeling of gratitude. All we ask is that you help us be there for others and for this community as we were for you. All we ask is that you become an active part of our mutual ministry.

Peter's mother-in-law, this unnamed and seldom-heralded woman, received something from Jesus. She was healed by his presence and his touch. Her feeling response was gratitude. Her action response was to serve. Through her service to Jesus and his disciples, I believe she became the first deacon of the newly emerging church.

Let us follow her example in the stewardship of our time, talent, and treasure.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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