

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 4, 2018
Mark 1:29-39

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Fever!

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well. Here's a story I can relate to. Jesus enters the house of Simon and Andrew and discovers Simon's mother-in-law in bed with a fever.

Truth be told, lots of us can relate. Nearly all of the staff over the past couple of weeks have experienced this and other symptoms. Fever, influenza, upper respiratory infections—the plagues of the day hit us hard here at St. Thomas. And we are healing. Not as quickly as did Simon's mother-in-law, but we're getting there.

Fever. It is no picnic. Nor has been the coughing accompanying the more troublesome versions of flu that have been going around.

But fever, for scripture, has other connotations. We use this medical designation of a heightened body temperature due to some internal malfunction or disease also metaphorically to describe crazed enthusiasm. Something is wrong in the body of the person or of the community. The astonishing list of curses in Deuteronomy 28 on those who do not keep the covenant includes fever. Whether or not Mark considered fever a sign of divine punishment, Jesus brings in the kingdom of God and removes the curse.

Those of us who have known fever of 103 or so know that it does indeed feel like a curse. We thank God when it passes. And we rise, as did Simon's mother-in-law, to serve, even if a bit more slowly than we'd like.

The passage leads me to ask about the fevers in our lives and in our world that need to be cured. One, I believe, is suggested by the text itself.

Did you notice that the passage implies that Simon Peter was married? I don't remember ever thinking about this before. But obviously, if Simon's mother-in-law is healed of fever in the story, he must have been married. This rock, on which some hold that Jesus says the church is to be built, had a wife.

So, Simon Peter was married. Yet we know nothing of her. There is only this story of the healing of her mother and a veiled reference to Peter being married in 1 Corinthians 9:5.

How odd. Though not perhaps odd for scripture. There are many women of importance who remain unnamed in the bible. Noah's wife, for instance. It's always "Noah and his wife." We never get let in on her name, even though she is one of only eight human beings who supposedly survived the great flood. Indeed, we only know the names of the four men: Noah, Ham, Shem, and Japheth.

This habit of not naming women begins even earlier in Genesis—Cain’s wife and Seth’s daughters. The Old Testament list is extensive—there are hundreds, and I won’t enumerate them here. Those in the New Testament are fewer, but many are worth noting: Peter’s wife, Peter’s mother-in-law, Jairus’ daughter, Jesus’ sisters, Herodias’ daughter, the Syro-Phoenician woman, Pilate’s wife, women at Calvary, the widow with two mites, the woman of Samaria, the daughters of Philip, and Paul’s sister.

The fever we might identify today, made manifest by what is not named, is the fever—the cultural sins—of patriarchy and sexism. The bible we hold to be sacred is a human product, written in contexts of history fraught with difficulty. Among those difficulties that rear a painfully ugly head perhaps more poignantly in these days, is a fixation upon male power and authority. The fevers of patriarchy and sexism have bequeathed to us a multitude of problems that only slowly begin to release their diseased grips on our hearts and souls.

And thank God that we are beginning to know the names of women who have fallen victim to some of these problems. Thank God that we are beginning to name and to listen. More than 250 women in one well-publicized case involving a highly placed doctor.

Power corrupts. A more truthful statement was never made. And the names and the voices convict men of all walks, from the media to the White House. It is high time we name, and hear, and honor the women of scripture and the women who have carried the consequences of patriarchy for too long.

There is an increasing fascination with the unnamed women of the Bible, many of whom hold a conspicuous place in sacred history. It is a sin of scripture that important women in the history of salvation remained unnamed. I have already mentioned the extreme oddity that the wives of Noah and his sons are not named. Scripture gives us the names of the natural brothers of Jesus, but not his sisters. The two sisters at Bethany whom Jesus loved, have well-known names, but of his own sisters silence reigns as to how they were known. Peter “the fisherman,” occupies a large niche in the portrait gallery of the New Testament, but all that is said of his dear partner is that she was his wife. Because of the close fellowship existing between Christ and the Twelve, the wives of the latter, if they were all married, must have been known both to the Jesus and to a large circle of disciples, yet the bible is silent as to their existence and to the names they bore. And why did Paul, who wrote so much of the New Testament, not give us the name of his own sister according to the flesh?

There is no satisfactory answer to the silence of scripture regarding the identity of its nameless women. George Eliot (a pen name for Mary Anne Evans, mind you) once remarked that, “The happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history.” But many of the happy—and unhappy and unknown bible women—left their impact upon history. They played their part in important events, but their signatures are not attached to their service.

It's true. The names of so many noble women have been withheld from us, yet they themselves have something of the immortality Rupert Hughes most impressively wrote about:

Sometimes at night within a wooded park,
Like an ocean cavern, fathoms deep in gloom,
Sweet scents, like hymns, from hidden flowers fume,
And make the wanderer happy; though the dark
Obscure their tint, *their name*, their shapely bloom.

So in the thick-set chronicles of fame,
There hover deathless feats of souls unknown;
They linger as the fragrant smoke-wreaths blown
From liberal sacrifices. Gone face and *name*!
The deeds like homeless ghosts, live on alone.

[from Herbert Lockyer, "All the Women of the Bible"]

Is that enough? Perhaps. But we can do better in our time. We can overcome the fever of cultural sexism and patriarchy. We can and should give names to those deeds.

Perhaps you have noticed subtle changes in our liturgy over the past few years. We have opted, with much input from the Worship committee and others, for occasional alternatives to the "Lamb of God" hymn that has traditionally graced our communion liturgy. This change arose from our Lenten study of biblical conceptions of the atonement, when we learned that the sacrificial language of "Lamb of God" is a decidedly minority biblical idea. It is based on one verse: John 1:29.

More to the point of patriarchal fever is the change in the Sanctus. Instead of "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," we now sing "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." It is actually a better translation of the verse from which it comes: Matthew 23:39. And it avoids the unnecessary linguistic exclusion of more than half of the population. Because it can refer to Christ's coming, but also to ours. These changes are subtle, but important.

Perhaps you already know that our national church published last November a "Draft Social Statement on Women and Justice." It speaks to the need for more inclusive language in liturgy. Here are a few of the statement's suggestions, many of which we already follow:

- Use inclusive language for humankind and inclusive and expansive language for God.
- Encourage the use of language for God that expands rather than limits our understanding of God's goodness and mystery.
- We support developing liturgies, hymns, prayers, and educational materials that broaden our language beyond primarily male images. This practice follows the scripture's witness that God is wholly other and transcends human categories of

sex and gender. Therefore, metaphors and images for God should be drawn from the lives of women and men, from nature, and from humanity in all its diversity to speak of the fullness and beauty of God.

- The movement away from male-oriented wording for human beings is necessary to counter patriarchy and sexism. The use of inclusive language is at the same time more precise and shapes how we think about each other as humans.
- The selection of particular words is powerful. The ELCA teaches that inclusive language about human beings should be the goal in both worship and everyday use...Words and images about God express how we understand God and affect how we understand ourselves. They simultaneously carry personal, communal, historical, and ecumenical implications.

With the counsel of the Worship Committee, a group is being called together to review our liturgical language here at St. Thomas. We hope to engage you in conversation and experimentation as we seek to be faithful to Jesus' message of radical equality and sensitive to matters of justice, especially for women. And we invite your input. Those being called together for this purpose are Dawn Bakken, Amy Balcam, Doug Bauder, Marie Fleming, Jerry Smith, and Pamela Smith.

As we work, we will seek to honor the unnamed women of scripture. It is worth noting in this context that many consider Simon Peter's mother-in-law to be the first deacon of the church—the first disciple of Jesus to be raised up to a calling to Word and Service, as we now name it in our church. This is a holy woman from a compelling story. She is an icon of resurrection and a paradigm of Christian ministry.

Mark's gospel invites us to look for experiences of resurrection in everyday life in the lives of families and in the social and political order. A debilitating fever is equivalent to death if one cannot do what is human to do—to serve, to feed, to provide for. To be released from illness and restored to oneself means one can fulfill responsibilities to others. The debilitating fevers of sexism and patriarchy prevent us from being restored to true community and fulfilling our responsibilities to each other.

May our Lord take us by the hand today. May Christ cure us of our fevers. May Jesus lift us up to new life. That we may serve one another with dignity and honor, in a context of justice. For we are all called to be deacons, to serve God's word and God's kingdom. Regardless of gender. Regardless of preconceived notions of who is worthy. Regardless of who others have said we should be. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.