

That We Might Not Misunderstand

Mark 1:29-39

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Have I ever told you this story?

If I haven't and it's your first time hearing it, know this – I wouldn't be sharing it with you if it didn't actually happen. That's my preface for it, ok? I'm just the messenger.

It was many years ago now, and I was still in seminary out in Richmond. I was taking a class by the good Lutheran, Dr. Stephen Brachlow, and it was a class on Christian Spirituality. Dr. Brachlow was one of my favorite professors at the seminary because he hated being called doctor. He preferred to just be called by his first name, Stephen. But I struggled against my own internal sense of propriety to abide by his request, so about the third time I called him "Dr. Brachlow, he said, "Dan, we've talked about this, and it's clear to me that this really is a *spiritual* issue for you. So let's compromise. In class, you may call me 'professor,' but if we run into each other in the real world, you have to use the name my mother gave me and of which I am very fond – Stephen."

The class on Spiritual Christianity was by far one of the most influential classes I took during seminary, because it introduced me to so many different ways of thinking about prayer – not just head bowed, fingers laced, offering a blessing over dinner; but also as a practice in silence and listening, as meditation, as creative expression, and he even instilled in us that work, when done with an appropriate awareness, is an act of prayer. In fact, it was in his class that I realized I was being called to be a pastor and not a professor.

I tell you all of this to give you a little taste of Dr. Brachlow's character before I go on.

At some point during the class, the subject matter concerned God's practice of choosing even broken vessels as partners in redemption. Him being a good Lutheran, he brought up the famous quote attributed to Martin Luther, "If you're going to sin, sin boldly." After quoting Luther, Dr. Brachlow jokingly said, "In my seminary days, we interpreted that by saying, 'If you're going to have one beer, you might as well have six.'" We all laughed and moved on without a second thought.

Well most of us moved on without a second thought. There was a student in that class named Hannah. Hannah was from China, and she had come to the U.S. to attend seminary with plans of returning to China to help serve the Church there. As a native of China, English was her second language.

At the end of the semester, in the final moments of the last day of class, Dr. Brachlow asked if anyone had any questions about anything that had been taught over the course of the semester. Hannah very tentatively raised her hand.

“Dr. Brachlow,” she began, “Earlier in the semester you brought up that quote by Luther about sinning boldly.”

“Yes?” he said, waiting for the question.

“My question is about you and your friends’ interpretation of it. You said that you and your friends interpreted that as: “If you’re going to have one beer, you might as well have sex.”

Well, I don’t know what exactly transpired in the moments after that, because I was literally rolling on the floor laughing. I do know that once I recovered, Dr. Brachlow’s face was still red with embarrassment.

It’s a terrible thing to be misunderstood. And I suspect that Jesus’ words, Jesus’ actions have been misunderstood and misrepresented more often in history than anyone else — even and, maybe especially, by those who follow him.

It was still the first day of his public ministry. He and those four disciples (Simon and Andrew and James and John) had been at the synagogue all morning where Jesus had been teaching and where he had cast the unclean spirit out of the man.

But then in Mark, the scene changes quickly: “As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew” (Mk. 1:29). Synagogues were public places for men, and houses were private places for women. Just by the scene change Mark is telling us that these stories are literary foils for one another. What Jesus does for a man restoring him to full life, he will also do for women.

When Jesus rolled into the house with his male entourage, they were informed that Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. And, with the blistering pace at which Mark’s gospel moves, we are given one verse that makes up the heart of the story:

“[Jesus] came and took her by the hand and raised her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them” (Mk. 1:31).

You know, millennia ago, the rabbis, our first serious interpreters of the biblical text, noted that most interpretation happens in the white spaces on the page — between the lines so to speak. In other words, it’s not what we read, but what we *infer* that often creates our interpretation.

For instance, in my church growing up, this one verse — (“[Jesus] came and took her by the hand and raised her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them” — was used by pastors and church leaders to make the theological claim that women’s work was in the house and women were to serve men. “See,” they’d say, “even Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law *so that she could serve them*.” In their minds, Jesus was clearly tired and hungry after a long day at the synagogue, and he healed her *so that* she could wait on him.

So, because of this theological assertion, women were not allowed to speak in worship or teach men or serve communion or serve as a *deacon*, which in that little church was the highest office a lay person could hold. The deep irony, though, is that the word, “serve,” in this verse, is the Greek word for *deacon*. “...she began to *deacon* them...” That’s what happens when we take a single verse or a small passage completely out of context. We misunderstand what Jesus *intended*.

But what if we keep reading? Mark’s gospel goes on:

“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 demons to speak, because they knew him” (Mk. 1:32-34).

Keep in mind, this is day 1 of Jesus’ public ministry — and already word has spread across the entire city of Capernaum. The crowds thronged to him, standing at the door of the house, piling around. It was as if the whole city had come to see this healer, this wonder working rabbi. In an instant, Jesus had gone viral.

But Jesus wasn’t in the popularity business. He was in the “kingdom of God” business.

Jim Sommerville, says it like this, “Tell me the truth: if you knew there was someone in your town who could heal the sick, or even if you only thought he might be able to heal the sick, isn’t there someone you would want to bring to him? Isn’t there some wheelchair somewhere you would want to roll up to his door? Some hospital bed you would want to push through the streets? Maybe you would want to bring yourself, under your own power, for the healing you alone know you need... Whatever their reasons everybody in the little town of Capernaum found some reason to be outside the door where Jesus was in the hope that he could heal. And he did heal. He worked late into the night apparently, “curing many who were sick with various diseases and casting out demons.” He was a sensation, and the sensation created a crisis in his ministry (“Does Preaching Make any Difference?” *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, Feb. 7, 2021).

So what did Jesus do? He snuck out of town to pray and get his head on straight.

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mk. 1:35). Jesus deep spirituality led him to a place of solitude where he could wrestle with his vocation. Was he just a healer? Or was God calling him to be something more than that?

Simon and the other disciples woke to find him missing and began frantically searching for him, hunting everywhere to find him — because the crowds were already gathering at the door again. This guy was their chance. They couldn’t lose him! They wanted to ride his wave all they way into the palace courts in Jerusalem! Couldn’t Jesus see what

they saw? This was the way to get on top. No more fishing nets, no more carpentry, no more hard labor or household chores even. *We could have servants do all of that for us* – if he will just keep the popularity soaring by healing these sick people. It was like they wanted to work PR for Jesus.

When they found him, they said, “What were you thinking? You can’t keep the public waiting like this, man. Everyone is looking *for you*.”

And, if you listen real close, you can almost hear Jesus’ eyes roll: “Let’s move on to the neighboring towns,” he said, “so that I can proclaim my message there also; for *that* is what I came out to do” (Mk. 1:38).

Now, let’s step back and get the “drone’s eye view.” This little passage is really a story in three acts:

Act 1: Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law, and she *serves* them

Act 2: Jesus’ *popularity* erupts, and he heals many

Act 3: His own disciples prefer *popularity* to *service*

Read like this, is this story really about a woman’s place? We aren’t the first to misunderstand Jesus.

What if there was another way to read this story? What if instead of reading it as a story about “a woman’s place,” we read it as the story of the first *deacon* in the New Testament?

Simon’s mother-in-law is *healed* by Jesus and she responds to her restored health by *servicing others*. Friends, is there a more apt description of Christian discipleship than that? Aren’t we those who claim to be healed by Christ, so that we might serve others?

What if, instead of trying to run PR for Jesus, Simon had learned from the example of his mother-in-law?

To be a Christian is to follow the one who said that he “did not come to be served but to serve,” and insisted that if we want to be great in his kingdom we must become like servants, too (Mark 10:42-44).

Victoria Garvey says it like this: “In the world in which we live and move and have our being, service is a term for jobs of inferior rank: servers, the service industry, service stations. When we’ve become successful, says this ideology, others serve us. But the Jesus we meet in the Gospels...teaches us that service is the higher, even the highest calling. To serve for the sake of others is the mark of true discipleship” (*The Christian Century*, January 27, 2021, p. 20).

Ed Trinka started working straight out of high school as a doorman at the Plaza Hotel in New York City in 1963 and has given it his all ever since.

When asked what was the best tip he ever got, he says he always tells the story about Jackie Gleason. "For Christmas time he says to me, 'What was the biggest tip you ever got?' And I says, 'Well, a hundred dollars.' And he says, 'Here's a hundred and fifty dollars and merry Christmas.' He says, 'By the way, who was the one that gave you the hundred?' I say, 'Well that was you last year.'"

Ed operates on a simple philosophy at the Plaza: treat everyone like they're a VIP.

On one occasion, a guest came down to him at 6:30 in the morning and he had to go to a very important meeting. He asked Ed where he could get his shoes shined. Ed sort of shook his head and said, "They don't open til 8:00 AM." But he went on, "Tell you what – give them to me, and you come back in half an hour or so and I'll have them done."

He went down to his locker where he kept his personal shoeshine kit, shined them up for him, came back up, he came by, put his shoes on, and got to his meeting – and they've been friends ever since.

How could one person serve others so easily, so willingly, so joyfully?

Ed points back to the mantra his father instilled in him: "Be such a person and live such a life, that if everybody lived a life like yours this would be God's paradise" (*StoryCorps*, October 5, 2007).

Our modern word, *deacon*, comes from a compound Greek word meaning "through the dust." In ancient times, it referred to those servants who walked through the dust to wait on tables.

What if Peter hadn't spent so much time wandering through the dust to find Jesus in order to get *him* to serve others, and had instead begun to serve others himself?

What if he had seen in his mother-in-law not someone to wait on him, but the very model of what it means to follow Christ; of what it means to be a *deacon*?

We have deacons in our church – though they often won't let me call them that. But I have witnessed them in action.

I have walked into a hospital room at 8:00 in the morning to visit Gene Hanson and found Kathy Wakerley feeding him his breakfast, because he did not have the strength to lift his own spoon.

I have driven by the church after dark and discovered Barbara Weiss changing the words in the church marquee to "We are all in this together."

I have called church member after church member only to hear, "Betty Lee Hill calls and checks in on me every week."

I have watched Marti Wells serve with tenderness and the love of Christ those people the rest of us would rather have forgotten.

We have deacons in our midst – and you can find them if you'll listen. They'll be the ones that say, "Live such a life that if everyone lived like you this would be God's paradise."

You can find them if you'll look. They'll be the ones with dust on their feet.

And if you're wise, you'll watch them. You will listen to what they say. Because they might just know which way Jesus went.

Amen.