

Recipient or Responder?

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany—February 7, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they 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.

We live in the age of "the Seeker." We like to speak of a large portion of our population as people who are seeking after truth and some understanding of life and of God. Seekers is also the term we attach to those who are looking for a church, and often seeking one which they hope will fit their tastes just perfectly. Our Gospel lesson from Mark 1 is a story about seekers—mobs of them—seeking Jesus. Some were pursuing healing as they had seen others healed. Others sought to be freed from evil spirits which tormented them, or possessed a friend or loved one. Many were simply amazed by Jesus' teaching and powers and wanted to see more. Even at this earliest stage of his ministry Jesus was surrounded by thousands of seekers, and among these many curious folks there was one who rose above the rest. This person was doing something much more noble, wise and exciting than seeking. This person was a finder, for this one had found the Kingdom of God and had begun to grasp its deepest mysteries. How did this happen, and how can we rise above the status of seeker? Let's look.

Mark presents us with a report on Jesus' ministry at its beginning, and though it was just getting started it already appeared to be in high gear. He was preaching in the synagogues, healing all kinds of diseases, and also casting out evil spirits. Mark also

shows us how Jesus kept his ministry moving. The next morning Jesus spent many hours in prayer before the sun rose and we are told that already many were seeking him. His disciples finally found him and he gave them an explanation of his plan for ministry. *“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. He was a man in motion, and while the town wanted him to stay and do more, Jesus followed a call from God to let many villages know that the Kingdom of God was near.

We are presented with a wild scene. In the verses leading up to our lesson we see Jesus sending a demon out of a man in the synagogue, which was quite a dramatic moment, and set off an argument with the Pharisees and leaders of the synagogue. After leaving that place, he healed Peter’s mother-in-law of a serious fever, and soon he would be healing numerous townspeople. As Mark tells it, *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.* Here was a huge mob seeking Jesus and his healing touch. I hope that you noticed the reference to the porch on Peter’s house where the people gathered as they sought help. A local ministry of the Lititz Mennonite Church is called “Peter’s Porch,” and like that time in Capernaum, they work to meet people who come seeking relief from their hurts and needs. And having gained all this attention, Jesus would soon leave town! As the Gospel story continues, we also find many seekers leaving their home towns to pursue the Savior for many miles. Jesus was creating quite a stir.

Who were these people? All four Gospels report that there were large crowds following Jesus throughout his three-year ministry. Apparently, they were masses of the common people. At times they appear to be pushy and obnoxious in their demands upon Jesus. Our Lord frequently looked for a time and place of rest as he was often near exhaustion, and more often than not these pursuing crowds prevented any such rest. Their energetic pursuit of Jesus may be easy to criticize as this made life difficult for our Lord, but a little sympathy is also in order. In the mission field we hear the word “rice-Christians” referring to those who acted as though they accepted the Christian message only to receive food and rewards from the missionary. There is little doubt that this sort of thing does happen, but we must be slow to judge those whose lives know real hunger. We may criticize some of the seekers in Jesus’ day as being merely curious, but who would not be consumed by curiosity to learn more about this amazing man? The ill who pursued Jesus were experiencing the miseries of disease and had a desperate sense that here was their only hope.

Jesus was being mobbed by hurting and longing people, and many were blessed to have received the restoring touch of the Savior! These recipients of blessing often followed Jesus to receive even more blessing. I suppose that we can all consider ourselves as recipients and seekers, as we have known at some time in our lives the grace and rescue of God, and as life relentlessly throws continuous troubles in our direction, we keep seeking another rescue. Like those who gathered around the

porch, we are all a needy people. When we speak of one being a seeker, we do so with a sense of nobility, for all should be seeking God. And when a seeker receives a blessing in this search we rightly rejoice. But in all the crowds of these recipients, we find one who rose above them all and attained a much greater Kingdom status. For those with eyes to see, there is a model of Kingdom greatness in one recipient of Jesus' healing touch, who rose to the exalted state of being no longer a recipient, but a *responder!*

I speak of Peter's mother-in-law. Consider Mark's testimony. *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.* Here was a woman who was deathly ill, was healed and then much more! Here was a woman who understood the mystery of the Kingdom of God, for having been touched by God, she rose up and served! She was not content to be a mere recipient of God's grace. She would be a responder! Jesus, by His healing touch, had poured out upon her grace, and she knew that this grace was to be joyfully received and then passed on! Gladly she rose and served.

Hers was a witness of gratitude! In our Reformed tradition we speak of our human *Guilt*, God's *Grace*, and then our response of *Gratitude*. This is the picture of our Christian life and walk. Some have summarized the Christian walk, not with G-words but with S-words. Peter's mother-in-law knew *Sickness* and *Sin*, but received *Salvation* from Jesus, and rose to *Serve*. I am embarrassed to say that too much of my response to being rescued from a painful situation, whether it be a matter of health or some other trouble, is *not* to give thanks and become infused with gratitude, but to sigh with relief and say, "Glad that's over. Now my life can get back to normal." We love normal, and life is much less stressful when there is a sense of regularity and rhythm. This is understandable and reasonable, but how sad it is when we become so focused upon our own schedules that we are easily blinded to the very touch of God! We do well to ponder the account of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19) and the nine who found more important things to do than to go back to their deliverer to return thanks. We have more in common with these nine than we care to admit.

But Peter's mother-in-law was a responder—a follower and a server. Her first thought was not, "Now where was I before this fever interrupted me," or "Hey, since Jesus healed my fever, maybe now he can heal my bum knee." Her first thought was of a grateful response. She, long before others, knew the secret of the Kingdom of God. She had been touched by the Servant King, and now she was joining Him in holy service. She, unlike the many around her, understood the basic economy of the Kingdom of God. In colleges and among the society insiders of our day there is talk of being "woke." This slang term means that one's conscience has been awakened to the real social needs and injustices of our day. The word also smacks of smugness as it implies that only the wise few know this while the rest are sleepy and uninformed. But one can say of Peter's mother-in-law that she was truly "woke" as she understood

what very few then grasped. She understood who Jesus was and what He was doing, and how we are to join Him in that great crusade. But she was not smug or proud, and her humble example invites us all to find and embrace this glorious secret of the Kingdom.

So how shall we follow in her footsteps? How shall we become grateful responders? It is not as easy as it appears. Upon hearing of her shining witness our immediate response is to proclaim that we too *should* rise up and serve as Jesus has touched our lives. Did you notice that word, “should?” Should is a part of the vocabulary of duty, and though duty is a good thing, it falls far short of gratitude. We are a people of duty. Tell us what we should do, and we will at least consider doing it. We usually think of duty as a paying back for blessings received. But Christ gives us blessings of such value that they cannot be repaid. I cannot pay Jesus back for His giving His life for me on the Cross, and then rising to conquer death. In fact, it is an insult to God to act as though we can pay Him back. More than feel obliged to serve, how can we be a people of a deep seated and active gratitude?

We can start by serving, whatever our motives might be. Perhaps you came to worship today and put a dollar in the plate because that is your grudging duty to God. Some might say, “if God wants only heart-felt service, then I will just stay home, because I am not feeling that enthused,” but that is not the way to resolve this problem. Serve, whatever your motive, then let your next assignment be to work on that motive. Often as we do the right thing, even with a bad motive, the right attitude follows. Let that grudging worship take a moment to pause and consider all that Christ has done for us and ask the Spirit to impress that upon our hearts.

Rejoice that you have been touched by God, and get into the habit of rejoicing. Consider what God has done for you over your lifetime. Don't think or speak of having lucky breaks, or even good fortune. Consider yourself touched by Jesus Christ. Worship, regular and heartfelt, is crucial to keeping our hearts and our attitudes right. It may take time, but the habit of praise cultivates gratitude. And let us learn to speak our praises. Just two days ago Kay and I celebrated the first birthday of our grandson Christopher. As I announced a year ago, his birth was a miracle, and it is a miracle of God that both he and his mother came through it all and without any lasting troubles. We were touched by the saving Jesus, and that is a praise which deserves a regular repeating. This is a key factor in a life of gratitude.

God wants to heal us and make us whole, not so that we can get our lives “back to normal,” but that we can then enter the Kingdom of God and serve there with joyful hearts. This is the true path of life. Ask yourselves, which is a richer and fuller life—a life full of safe regularity, or a daily walk with the Son of God toward glory? What path of service is God preparing for you at this moment? Who around you may need a helping hand? What gifts, skills and resources have you received in life that you might use them for Jesus? Follow that path of Christian service, for it is there that you

will meet the Savior. In a few moments we will meet Christ at the table. A heart set only on duty sees only bread and wine and the responsibility of showing up for this sacrament. Let us all ask God to open our eyes, that we might see the One who came from heaven to serve and guide us, the One who died that we might live, the One who walks with us daily and will someday invite us to the great table when we will see Him face to face. And let us go from this place like those who have dined with the King—humbled, grateful and glad to serve in His Name.

Peter was the head of the apostles. He played a prominent role in Jesus' ministry and the establishment of the Church and he has much to teach us. But today let our hats be off to one of his family who understood the secret of the Kingdom, and learned to be more than a recipient but a responder, well before her son-in-law did.