

Service as Our Prayer

Our Gospel reading this morning invites us to think about service. Jesus and his disciples have just left the synagogue and gone to Simon's house, probably hoping to grab some dinner. But Simon's mother-in-law, the lady of the house, is sick with a fever. That wouldn't be a big deal these days, because we have medicines that can cure most fevers pretty quickly. There were no antibiotics in Jesus's time, though. People who got sick enough to run a fever often died. Simon's mother-in-law must be pretty sick, because she's lying in bed when Jesus and his friends arrive. People are probably surprised when Jesus goes into her sickroom to see her and shocked when he picks up her hand. Men didn't touch women they didn't know back then, and touching someone who was seriously ill would have violated the purity laws. Jesus never worries too much about those laws when he's healing someone, though. As soon as he heals her, Simon's mother-in-law hops out of bed and goes to serve Jesus and his friends.

This is such a short story that it's easy to miss its significance, but this is Jesus's first healing miracle in the Gospel of Mark, and it has a lot to teach us. Ignoring all the cultural taboos of his time, Jesus saves this sick lady from death. That's huge, and Simon's grateful mother-in-law repays Jesus with service. Some women, me among them, get a little annoyed that Simon's mother-in-law steps into traditional feminine subservience the minute she's feeling better, cooking food and waiting on the men while they relax at the table. But before we get too grouchy about that, we need to talk about what service is in this passage, and that means I need to teach you a little bit of Biblical Greek.

The word Mark uses is *diakoneó* (διακονέω). It means "to serve," and it also means "to minister." *Diakoneó* doesn't show up often in Mark's Gospel, but it's important when it does. Mark uses *diakoneó* for the angels who minister to Jesus and the women who care for him

throughout his ministry. Jesus tells his disciples that, if they really want to be great, they have to serve others. He also tells them that he himself comes not to be served, but to serve. If *diakoneó* is good enough for the angels, the disciples, and Jesus, it's good enough for us.

Service has always been an important pillar of Scouting. The Scout Oath asks those of us who have worn the badge to promise that we'll "help other people at all times," which is what service is all about. Sometimes Scout troops do service projects like picking up litter, planting trees, gathering canned goods for food pantries, or helping out at community events. (You Scouts were a big help with our Earth Day and the Arts Festival last April, and I hope you'll join us again this year.) Service is an important requirement for many of the merit badges you work so hard to earn. And then there's individual service, all the different ways you Scouts serve the people you see every day. It's not just about helping seniors cross the street. It's about helping your parents with chores, helping other kids who might be having trouble in school, helping a neighbor who could use an extra hand carrying groceries or shoveling the driveway, or helping out at the library or the local animal shelter. *Diakoneó* is about looking for opportunities to help out wherever you're needed, sharing your talents and enthusiasm to make the world better for everyone around you.

I'm probably making it sound like service is a whole lot of work. It can be, but it can also be a whole lot of fun. You can have a really good time doing service projects with your fellow Scouts, especially if you add an element of friendly competition, like who can pick up the most bags of trash or collect the most cans of soup. The competition has to be friendly, though. Service stops being fun if you get into an argument with your friends about who does it best. The disciples did that sometimes and trust me, that never turned out well.

Being a Scout teaches you the importance of service, and that sets you up to succeed in life. You might think that success is all about how much money you have or how famous you are, but it's not. Success is all about helping to make the world a better place. It's about how many lives you touch and how big a difference you make. You do those things through service, and there are many ways to serve other people. This being the first Sunday of Black History Month, let's give a nod to just a few of the great Black leaders who got their start in Scouting. There's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the great civil rights leader whose courage and eloquence inspired millions of Americans to fight for social justice in our country. There's Colin Powell, the four-star Army General, former Secretary of State and Silver Buffalo Award recipient. There's Togo West, Secretary of Veterans Affairs in the Clinton administration and distinguished Eagle Scout. There's Guilon Bluford, Eagle Scout and the first Black American in space. The Girl Scouts have produced their share of great Black leaders, too. There's Elaine Jones, civil rights attorney and former President of the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund. There's Alexis Herman, Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration, Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State in the second Bush administration, acting legend Queen Latifah, and former First Lady Michelle Obama. Scouting helped shape these great Americans into the leaders they grew up to be. Scouting can help shape you, too, and it all begins with service.

In the Episcopal Church, there's a group of ministers who are servants to those in need. We call them deacons, after *diakoneó*. They have several jobs; one of the most important is to bring the needs of the world to the church's attention so we can work together to make things better. Deacons are often associated with feeding the hungry. Simon's mother-in-law became the first deacon when she got up from her sickbed to serve Jesus and his disciples some dinner. And I'll bet she kept on serving people even after Jesus and the disciples went on to other towns.

The world always offers us plenty of opportunities for service. If it feels like a lot when the Scouts ask you to serve, remember what Jesus did in this morning's passage. He had just come from the synagogue, where he exorcized a demon from one of the congregants. Jesus made it look easy, but banishing demons can be very hard work. Nobody could have blamed him if he had decided to take a break after dinner and spend the evening hanging out with his friends. But when the whole city came to the door bringing people who needed his help, Jesus served, and served, and served. He healed many sick people and cast out demon after demon. By the time he was done, he must have been really tired. No matter how hard we work to serve one another, Jesus worked harder. That tells me two important things. First, Jesus believed in service, and he practiced what he preached. Second, there's no better way for us to thank God for all the good things in our lives than to serve other people. The Scouts will help you learn how.

The Scout Law says that Scouts are supposed to be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and *reverent*. That last word, *reverent*, means "super-respectful," and some people think that includes being super-respectful to God. You don't have to be an Episcopalian to be reverent; you don't even have to be a Christian. But it helps, I think, if you're grateful for all the awesome things in your life, and if being grateful inspires you to give something back by serving others. I grew up in a religious tradition where we said every week that love is the teaching of the church, the quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer. Serving others is a way to pray not just with your words, but with your hands and feet. It's a way to thank God for our blessings and to love our neighbors as ourselves. I pray that God will bring your many opportunities for service throughout your lives, and that you will serve with gratitude and joy. You are Scouts, and you help other people at all times because that's what Scouts do. And when you do, you make God proud. *Amen*.