

## **“Healed to Serve”**

A sermon preached by  
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### **Mark 1:29-39**

*<sup>29</sup>As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. <sup>30</sup>Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. <sup>31</sup>He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

*<sup>32</sup>That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. <sup>33</sup>And the whole city was gathered around the door. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. <sup>36</sup>And Simon and his companions hunted for him. <sup>37</sup>When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” <sup>38</sup>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.” <sup>39</sup>And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

In the era of the #MeToo movement, the idea of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law bouncing out of bed after being laid low with a fever, to serve Simon and his hungry buddies from the disciple “biz” is pretty uncomfortable to confront. Indeed, this is probably one of scores of patriarchal stories from the scripture that seem to justify that a woman’s place is in service to the man. And clearly there are churches today where this kind of narrow and bigoted understanding of gender roles is still being preached.

In this congregation, you might assume that a sermon on the need to accept and celebrate all forms of gender identity might not be needed or necessary. In the church’s history, three women have served as clergy here, beginning with Sara Webb Phillips in the early 1990’s and including my two current colleagues Jane and Bonny. So you might think we’d say something like, “Been there, done that.” But the three women represent a very small percentage of the clergy leadership here at First Church over the last 164 years of our history. With the appointment of Pastor Grace Imathiu, that number goes up to four women clergy, but it’s still a minimal number when compared the long line of white men that they are following.

So today I want to talk a bit about women in the church and particularly in leadership roles within the church. But before I do, I want to remind us that this conversation also takes place in the context of our congregation's ongoing efforts to understand, welcome, support, and advocate for those who are transgender, gender variant, and otherwise transcend binary gender expectations. Many of us are new to these understandings so we have and will continue to stumble and not always fully comprehend the nuances of our relationships with others and how they wish to identify themselves. But that doesn't excuse us from seeking to support and more fully understand those whose identities are different from our own.

First a little history lesson. In the last forty years, the understanding of women in ancient Christianity has been almost completely revised. Karen King of Harvard's Divinity School has written extensively about this phenomenon and she maintains, "As women historians entered the field in record numbers, they brought with them new questions, developed new methods, and sought for evidence of women's presence in neglected texts and exciting new findings. For example, only a few names of women were widely known: Mary, the [mother of Jesus](#); Mary Magdalene, his disciple and the first witness to the resurrection; Mary and Martha, the sisters who offered him hospitality in Bethany."<sup>1</sup> In many places, like the text this morning, the women aren't even named; instead we hear of their role in relationship to men. "Simon's mother-in-law" is all that we get. Such patriarchal biases are not surprising the context of Jesus' world and time, but they are certainly not an excuse for continued bias and prejudice toward women today.

And perhaps equally as important is the scholarship that is showing that women had a much more expansive contribution to the formation of the early church than was previously portrayed. We are learning more of the many women who contributed to the formation of Christianity in its earliest years.

Paul's letters speak of several women who were prominent in the Jesus movement. Women hosted the early gatherings of Christians in their homes, and some scholars now believe that the majority of the first century church membership was female.

Yet one of the realities of the histories that we read is that many of the stories of those excluded are never told. By the time of Constantine's death-bed conversion to the faith in 337, the patriarchal influence on the church had already taken hold over the Christian movement that

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<sup>1</sup> Karen L. King, Women In Ancient Christianity: The New Discoveries," PBS Frontline Website, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/women.html> , 1998

had begun as a counter-cultural religious expression. In other words, men took over. King writes that if you want to take one story as an example of how history gets re-written by the victors, consider the story and legend of Mary Magdalene. Although the gospel presents no evidence for this, she became infamous in Western Christianity as an adulteress and repentant whore. Perhaps an ancient version of slut shaming. “But discoveries of new texts from Egypt, along with sharpened critical insight, have now proven that this portrait of Mary is entirely inaccurate. She was indeed an influential figure, a prominent disciple and leader of one wing of the early Christian movement that promoted women's leadership.”<sup>2</sup>

So, the result has been a centuries-long effort to reclaim the important leadership role of women in the church. Mirroring the culture's discrimination against women, we have been part of a struggle that for Methodists goes back to 1787, when John Wesley himself authorized Sarah Mallet to preach over the objections of some male Methodist preachers. In 1880 Anna Howard Shaw, a graduate of Albion College and Boston University's School of Theology, was refused ordination rights after she had been preaching as a local pastor for seven years. In 1920 the General Conference formally authorized conferences to allow women to be local pastors, even though some had already been doing so. Two years later, my grandmother, Blanche Sheppard Francis, became the third woman in the Detroit Conference to be assigned as pastor to a local church. She served in four churches from 1922 until 1957, when she retired.<sup>3</sup> In her church in LaPorte, Michigan, six young people (interestingly they were all men) answered a call to full-time Christian service and became pastors during her nine-year tenure there.

In wasn't until 1956 that women were granted full ordination rights in the Methodist Church, and it took another 24 years before Marjorie Matthews was the first woman to be elected as a Bishop in The United Methodist Church. Over the years, others have followed, including our own Bishop Sharon Rader, who was elected in 1992. These women and the allies who supported them were trail blazers. So, as a denomination we have made progress, but there still exists a glass ceiling that limits the number of appointments and elections for women. That is why I think Rev. Grace Imathiu's appointment here is so significant, because it not only signals a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Cecelia Learn Jordan, “The First Women Preachers in the Detroit Conference,” Reprinted in the Detroit Conference Historical Messenger, p. 5, November 1987

new day for First Church, its members, and its community. It also signals the continual march toward equality that seems so long in coming.

The dynamics of power and authority will, no doubt, shift here as the congregation accepts and supports a senior pastor who is not only a woman but a woman born and raised in Kenya. It will be a both a gift and a challenge to the church. And I am certain that the congregation is more than equal to the task, just as I know that Grace is more than equal to the task of leading the church into the next generation of service and mission. I am also sure that the gifts of her ministry here will far outweigh the challenges that she faces. I encourage you to pray for her and for the church as we make this way into a new phase of ministry.

I come from a family and a heritage that wasn't and isn't afraid to challenge the status quo in these issues. In addition to my grandmother, my father also considered himself an ally for women's equality within the church, and it is my great honor to support in any way possible this march toward freedom and this barrier breaking moment for First Church.

So the *healing for service* that we anticipate isn't the one that Mark's author would have claimed in this gospel story. It is a healing of the racial and gender discrimination that has invaded the church for millennia. And as the healing continues, so too does the service move forward.

Peace be with us all. AMEN