

# Healing the Fevers of Life

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## Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

The centerpiece of the stone ruins of the village of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee's northwest shore is the black octagonal Church of the Panis Vitae (Bread of Life), built directly above what is believed to be Simon Peter's house, the setting for this weekend's Gospel story [Mark 1:29-39]. One of my mentors and teachers, the late Passionist Father Carroll Stuhlmüller, once told me that the real centerpiece of Capernaum should be a huge memorial statue dedicated to the mothers-in-law of the world!

Try for a moment just to imagine the setting of this day in the life of Jesus. The newly constituted group of disciples who had left their nets, boats, hired servants, and even their father, to follow the Lord [1:16-20] are delighted in his presence. Jesus' words and actions completely overpower evil. His personality is so compelling and attractive. Leaving the synagogue where an evil spirit has been overcome, Jesus and his disciples walk only a few feet before encountering further evils of human sickness, prejudice and taboo. We read: "The whole city gathered together about the door" [1:33-34]. What a commotion!

In Mark's Gospel, the very first healing by Jesus involves a woman. He approaches Simon's mother-in-law as she lay in bed with fever. He takes her by the hand and raises her to health [1:31]. Such actions were unacceptable for any man — let alone someone who claimed to be a religious figure or leader. Not only does he touch the sick woman, but also he then allows her to serve him and his disciples. Because of the strict laws of ritual purity at that time, Jesus broke this taboo by taking her by the hand, raising her to health, and allowing her to serve him at table.

Peter's mother-in-law's response to the healing of Jesus is the discipleship of lowly service, a model to which Jesus will repeatedly invite his followers to embrace throughout the Gospel and which he models through his own life. Some will say that the purpose of this weekend's Gospel story is to remind us that this woman's place is in the home. That is not the purpose of the story. The mother-in-law's action is in sharp contrast to that of her son-in-law, Simon, who calls to Jesus' attention the crowd that is clamoring for more healings [1:37] but does nothing, himself, about them.

In Mark's Gospel stories of the poor widow [12:41-44], the woman with the ointment [14:3-9], the women at the cross [15:40-41], and the women at the tomb [16:1], women represent the correct response to Jesus' invitation to discipleship. They stand in sharp contrast to the great insensitivity and misunderstanding of the male disciples. The presence of Jesus brings wholeness, holiness and dignity to women. How often do our hurtful, human customs prevent people from truly experiencing wholeness, holiness and dignity?

In the Old Testament reading from Job [7:1-7], Job doesn't know it yet, but he is part of a "test" designed between Satan and God. Prior to Sunday's verses, Job has endured immense suffering and loss. He knows that the shallow theological explanations of his friends are not God's ways; but still, he is at a loss to understand his own suffering. Job complains of hard labor, sleepless nights, a dreadful disease and the brevity of his hopeless life. For Job, all of life is a terrible fever! How often do we experience "Job" moments in our own life as our fevers burn away?

The healing of Simon's mother-in-law proclaims Jesus' power to heal all sorts of fevers. Around the year 400 A.D., St. Jerome preached on Sunday's Gospel text in Bethlehem: "O that he would come to our house and enter and heal the fever of our sins by his command. For each and every one of us suffers from fever. When I grow angry, I am feverish. So many vices, so many fevers. But let us ask the apostles to call upon Jesus to come to us and touch our hand, for if he touches our hand, at once the fever flees" ["Corpus Christianorum," LXXVIII 468].

With Jesus, healing of mind and body becomes a clear sign that the Kingdom of God is already present. Jesus' healing Word of power reaches the whole person: it heals the body and even more important, it restores those who suffer to a healthy relationship with God and with the community.

May we pray with confidence the words of Cardinal John Henry Newman's Sermon on Wisdom and Innocence: "May he support us all the day long, till the shades lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in his mercy may he give us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last."

Finally, it is important to recognize what Jesus did after he healed the woman in Sunday's story. He took time away to strengthen himself through prayer. Do we do the same in the midst of our busy worlds in which we live, in the midst of the burning fevers of life and the burdens of our daily work?

May these first moments of Jesus' ministry in Mark's Gospel teach us to recognize the goodness which God brings into our lives, but also that this goodness is not ours to hoard for ourselves. The healing power of Jesus is still effective today — reaching out to us to heal us and restore us to life.