

Children's Moment¹ [*Band-Aid® required*]

Good morning, girls and boys. Esperanza and I pray for you and your family. We hope you are safe and well.

Excuse me, while I wait for Esperanza to help me. She's putting a Band-Aid® on a spot where I can't reach. That's a very nice thing for her to do. Thank you, dear, that feels better.

Our key word for today is "serve." It goes along with the word "heal."

Mark tells of a time when Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law and many others who were sick. He made them well again. When you were sick, maybe someone helped you feel better by taking care of you. That's one way we can care for others. We do it because it's the right thing to do. Sometimes, we do it because we're grateful. Simon's mother-in-law did that. After she got better, she got up and helped others. Jesus prayed for people who were sick as well as helping them with bandages, cool clothes and in other ways.

Jesus also heals the hurts of people on the inside. Sometimes people hurt when they are sad, lonely, or upset. Jesus can take care of those hurts too!

Think of one hurt on the inside you may have right now. Maybe you're sad because your friend moved away or you're having a problem at school. Maybe you're sad because someone is sick or you don't like going to school on the computer. Think about that hurt. You can ask your parents to put a Band-Aid® on your hand to help you remember that Jesus can help heal that hurt, just like Esperanza put a bandage on me. Every time you look at your Band-Aid® today, remember Jesus loves you and is with you. Sometimes you might feel better quickly and sometimes it might take some time. But remember this: Jesus promises to always be with us!

Will you pray with me? Loving and caring God, thank you for taking care of our hurts. Please help each one of us to help others when they are hurt. Thank you for loving us. In Jesus' precious and strong name. Amen

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/follow-me/fifth-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fifth-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-b-childrens-lessons>

Message: “They Began to Serve”²

Let me begin today by showing appreciation, saying “thank you.”

I offer my heartfelt thanks to those who serve and care for other people. This includes a wide variety of people, from those who work in customer service to those who care for a loved one at home.

One group I particularly appreciate are those we lump into the category of “essential workers.” The first on the list are those who care for the sick, particularly those battling COVID-19. Doctors, nurses and staff in medical facilities are in the forefront, as are the EMTs and ambulance teams. They knowingly place their lives at risk to offer care and be with people, even at the end of their lives.

Another group I appreciate are those who serve us, not knowing when or how they may be exposed to the virus and other pandemics. This includes police officers, fire fighters, grocery store staff, teachers, care providers and people who work in any sort of personal service role. These people serve willingly, but also by necessity, for some have limited options.

A third group I appreciate are those who serve in quiet, unrecognized and unknown ways. This includes many of you, who care for your loved ones – friends and family, who are sick or otherwise impacted by accident, disease, abuse or just the challenges of aging. Those who serve in this way do so out of love, because you care.

Thank you for all you do, wherever you are. You are essential. Yet, as a society, we don’t pay you enough, give you time off, provide adequate healthcare or thank you enough. What I can give I freely offer; my thanks and my prayer for God to guide you and keep you safe.

If you haven’t figured it out, the word for today is “service.” The children’s lesson is based on service. It’s a key to a whole life. We read from Mark’s gospel a simple story with profound meaning. Serving others is highlighted. It’s not just part of our call. It’s our response to what Jesus has done, is doing and will do in our lives. Let’s spend a few minutes reflecting on service.

² Material drawn from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/follow-me/fifth-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fifth-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-b-preaching-notes>

Let's celebrate service today, but not as another call to do more, give more, work harder or fill our overburdened schedules with more work. Yes, there is always a call to more service. Today, let's celebrate service by saying "thank you." Who can we thank for service? How can we cultivate a spirit of gratitude for the ones we have gotten used to ignoring, those who have become a part of the background noise of living in the world as it is?

The specific action of this woman Jesus healed is skimmed over.

We don't know what she did, how she served. We only know she did. And that was worth comment for Mark. He could have said, she got up and she was well. Instead, he told us her response to this gift was service. Her gratitude wasn't expressed in words, but in action.

The difference between last week's narrative and the healing in this one is stark. Jesus healed a man from evil only to pivot and heal the mother-in-law of his disciple. There are some maladies that require confrontation and some that need kindness and the human touch. The key, of course, is knowing which is which.

We know little about the people involved in this event. What we do know is that, after the scene in the synagogue, Simon invites Jesus and the others home. Since Simon is a natural leader, you could almost imagine it as a mission planning session. As they enter the house, Simon is reminded of his mother-in-law's condition. Maybe he says, "Glad you're here, Jesus, please keep it down, my Mom is sick." There's no asking, no plea of faith. Mark simply says they were told about her. The next thing you know, Jesus is marching into the mother-in-law's room, takes her by the hand and lifts her up.

Think about that for a moment. Sure, there was the confrontation in the synagogue and the compelling call from the fishing boats. But nothing to this point suggests such a power. What did they think as Jesus walk over to the fevered woman and pulls her to her feet? All we might see are taboos: rules about contact between men and women, laws of hospitality between guest and host, being in the present of the sick, too many to mention. Yet there Jesus goes without a word.

And the healing is silent. No "your sins are forgiven" or "your faith has made you well." He just grabs her hand and yanks her to her feet. Eyes were popping and necks were cracking all over the house. Except Mom. Mark, in his familiar spare prose, describes the only proper response to a miracle such as this: "and she began to serve them."

What did she do? It isn't specified. Who was included? Everyone. Notice she served them. Not just Jesus. When we're blessed, the blessing spills out on those around us. We don't just bask in the healing, in the blessing. We get to work. But let's be clear. She isn't paying a debt. She isn't earning the gift. She's responding to the blessing. All our work, all our service is in response to what has already been given to us.

From that domestic scene, we move back to world surrounding them. Word gets out, hope stirs many feet, so people beat a path to the door. Mark implies that the healings – physical, mental and spiritual, continued into the night. The first two opened the floodgates, and Jesus' fame spread. But the story doesn't stop there.

There's a little leadership message slipped into the narrative.

Jesus works long into the night, healing all who come. But then, early in the morning, he slips away to pray, breathe and connect with the source of his strength, God. Jesus was gone long enough to cause concern, so they went looking for him. Jesus took the time he needed. Jesus kept his priorities, even in the face of the continual demands on him. "Everyone is searching for you," the disciples told him when they found him. Everyone - the crowd, the hungry, needy, demanding crowd - is searching for you.

Why did he leave? It doesn't feel right, to leave behind those who were searching, those who were hurting. But Jesus moves on - not to avoid responsibility since he heals and teaches everywhere he goes. He keeps focused on the mission, even when it seems a bit harsh. It was his mission and service to cover more ground in the limited amount of time.

See, some would stay in one place and focus on those who were already there, those on the inside. Some argue the emphasis ought to be on the ones who belong, who have already come. Yet, Jesus says, “I have to go to those who haven’t yet heard. I have to continue to move out, go further, speak to more, serve others.”

What about those who are already in? Don’t we care about them? To put it in terms of a parable, what about the ninety-nine? Don’t they matter? Of course they do. But we have the community around us. We have the experience of Jesus that we can share with one another. We can build on the knowledge and experiences we already have.

We who carry the name of Jesus with us, must, like him, carry it out to those who haven’t yet heard - those who don’t yet know him. Our neighbors are hurting, lost and don’t have the blessing we have, a community that loves and cares for us, just as we are. We’re making disciples, even as we’re being made disciples. That’s our service. Like Simon’s mother-in-law, we don’t just serve him; we serve them. All of them. Any of them. We serve generously out of gratitude.

We find encouragement and an atmosphere for service for all of us when we begin to celebrate the small and large acts of service we do. Let our prayers include the humble servants around us. Let our confession be of how we have overlooked the presence of Christ in a simple act of giving and service in front of us.

I invite you to think about who served you recently and how you could show your appreciation. And perhaps, you may find yourself serving others freely and willingly, with love.

Then others may say of us: “They began to serve.”

Mark 1:29-39 (CEB)

After leaving the synagogue, Jesus, James, and John went home with Simon and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed, sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she served them.

That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. The whole town gathered near the door. He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn’t let the demons speak, because they recognized him.

Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. Simon and those with him tracked him down. When they found him, they told him, “Everyone’s looking for you!”

He replied, “Let’s head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That’s why I’ve come.” He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons.