

The Truth About Gladys
Mark 1:29-39
© Stacey Steck
Preached February 8, 2015 at San José, Costa Rica

Friends, tonight, I will spare you the mother-in-law jokes. The world has enough of those already and there are other far more important things to talk about. No, I won't tell you any jokes, but there will be a punch line. But before I share it, let's see what happened to the mother-in-law in tonight's story and see if you can't figure it out ahead of time.

You may remember from last week, that as we begin Mark's Gospel, Jesus has just undertaken his first public act, to teach in the synagogue, at which everyone was amazed, everyone including an unclean spirit that tried to heckle Jesus and whom Jesus called out of the body of the unfortunate man who had been the spirit's host. And the people were pretty impressed with that little display of power and authority. And now tonight's story is a continuation of last Sunday's episode, as word is spreading that Jesus is the right kind of menace to society. Probably looking for a little downtime after all the excitement of the exorcism, he and the first four disciples duck into Peter's home in the town of Capernaum only to find his sainted mother-in-law ill with a fever, and of course, Jesus is told about the poor woman's condition, which could possibly have been pretty grave given that this was what, only two thousand years before the invention of the antibiotics we take for granted? Now the story is pretty thin on details, like the seriousness of

her condition, which is why we can also only assume that it was because Jesus had compassion for her that he takes her by the hand and “lifts her up” which takes away her fever. And then, again without any more of what would be really helpful details, we learn that she begins to serve them, presumably food and drink, maybe getting the spare room ready for the night.

Yes, the details are pretty thin about the particulars of the situation and the motivations of the characters, and so people through the centuries have taken the liberty of filling in the blanks, and you can’t really blame them. Drama demands details. I would really like to believe some of the very interesting, thoughtful interpretations I have read of the significance of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law. According to some, she is the first real deacon of the church, because Mark uses the same word to describe her service, *diakonos*, as the one used for those later, formally ordained servants of the church. Some say she is a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Jesus because Mark uses the same word to describe when Jesus “lifted her up” as is used for what God did for Jesus on Easter morning. Some say she is the fifth disciple, called right after the first four, and evidence that there were women very early on as disciples. All of that sounds great when talking about this unnamed woman, and I really want to be able to assign a greater significance to this event, but I just can’t quite be convinced. No, I think the reason Mark tells us that Peter’s mother-in-law got up and began immediately to serve Jesus and the

others in her house is simply to show just how potent is Jesus' healing touch, that she was now fully well, and quickly on top of that. She is as good as new, ready to resume her life, restored to her position in her family and her community. And then Jesus goes on to do the same for everyone else in town that had a need as they all crowded around the door to her house, which probably made even more work for the woman.

And yet, because this story is so thin on details about Peter's mother-in-law, it leaves us wanting. We don't even know her name. The story doesn't reveal her motivation or her attitude. So, let's give her a name, because "Peter's mother-in-law" is just too long and cumbersome. Let's call her Gladys, that's a good mother-in-law name. So, was Gladys so grateful to be back on her feet that she was glad to serve them? Or was it just business as usual, and of course she would serve them, because that is what she, and every other woman would do? She probably could have milked the whole thing and taken it easy for a little while. Or maybe she couldn't. Maybe Gladys was one of those people who was like Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus, someone who just had to be busy. Look at Gladys's response compared to Mary's? Even physically well to begin with, with a party thrown at her house, Mary didn't feel the need to serve, but rather to sit at the feet of the master. And here is Gladys, someone who would have had every right to sit at Jesus' feet in adoration and thanksgiving, but who goes the Martha route. And so

we don't know whether Gladys saw her service as duty, or as delight, whether she did it grudgingly, muttering under her breath, "Geez, what do I have to do to get a break around here?" or joyfully, whistling a happy tune as she made order out of the chaos created during her illness. The story of Mary notwithstanding, the question is not really, "Would she serve or not?" but "How would she serve?" or "Would that service continue once Jesus had left and things were back to normal?"

You see, it is not a given that the people healed by Jesus are so filled with gratitude that they drop everything to serve others with joy and thanksgiving on their hearts and lips. In this story, we read about a lot of people who should be grateful, but we don't know if they really were. How many would remember to say thank you? Remember when Jesus healed the ten lepers, and although they each dutifully went off to show the priest what had happened, only one of them thanked Jesus, and he was a foreigner? As I thought of that example, I remembered it as a parable, as a way for Jesus to make a point in his teaching, but no, it is part of the story, told as a real incident. No, not everyone responds so gratefully when the good news comes calling. I remember a story my mother used to tell about a man she knew when she was a child, a blind man who was as cheerful as cheerful could be, seemingly in no way resentful about having lost his sight in the war, a joyful fixture in the neighborhood, even helping other blind people to cross the street to escort them to our family's drug store. And then one day, out of nowhere, he

regained his sight. Poof! Just like that he could see, like a story from the Bible. And you'd have thought he'd be an unstoppable force for joy from then on. But from that very day, he began to go sour like wine going to vinegar. For reasons nobody knows but him, he became bitter and withdrawn, a shell of his former, cheerful, life-giving self. No, not everyone responds positively to divine intervention in their lives.

In one form or another, we've each been touched by Jesus. That's why we're here, either because we've been healed, or because we want to be healed. That's the story for every Christian, really. We have responded to Jesus reaching out to us and lifting us up. And just as true is that the vast majority of us have to go back to work after we've been healed, back to our roles as workers or parents or mothers-in-law or whatever it is we do. Like Gladys, we don't really have a lot of choice about getting right back up to serve. We can't all drop everything, like Peter, and expect some Gladys to clean up our mess. No one is going to pity us or do our dishes. The choice we do have, however, is whether we do what we have to do with a sense of duty, or with a sense of delight, with hearts that are resigned to our station in life or grateful for it, despite how inglorious it may be.

Or maybe it's not that cut and dried, about duty or delight. Maybe that's a false dichotomy. Lately, I've been reading the diaries of Dorothy Day, the social activist and longtime leader of the Catholic Worker Movement, someone who

devoted nearly all her life to serving those nobody else wanted to serve, the unemployed, the mentally ill, the drunk, the conscientious objector. Through all of her decades of work, she kept a diary, and the friend who edited her diaries for publication decided to call the book “The Duty of Delight,” which was one of Dorothy’s favorite phrases, one she borrowed from the 19th century English critic John Ruskin. For Dorothy Day, that phrase, ‘the duty of delight,’ “served as a reminder [maybe even an obligation] to find God in all things – the sorrows of daily life and the moments of joy, both of which she experienced in abundance.” Dorothy Day “was particularly devoted to St. Therese of Lisieux, who taught the value of the “Little Way” a path to holiness that lay in performing all our daily tasks and duties in a spirit of love and in the presence of God. Dorothy embraced this teaching and drew out its social implications. She believed that each act of love, each work of mercy, might increase the balance of love in the world. Each act of protest or witness for peace, though [to all appearances] foolish and ineffective, works at transforming the world.” None of that work, however, was her duty. Her duty was to find delight in that work.

As much as I agree with her perspective, I also think it needs to be turned around, that in addition to the “duty of delight,” we need to embrace the “delight of duty,” that spirit of satisfaction, of contribution, that comes with having and playing a role, with doing what we need to do to, with having, and fulfilling,

certain obligations to God and to self and to community and to creation, and yes, to church. As the Apostle Paul so often reminds us, yes, we are free in Jesus Christ, but that only makes us slaves and servants to God and to others. Our delight in God creates a duty to others, a duty which, if we can be mindful of it, offers us delight once again in return. Just like Gladys, God has made us part of something and that is worth celebrating.

So, I've spared you the mother-in-law jokes. Now here's the punchline. Tonight, we want to ask you to reflect a little on your duty and your delight with respect to your finances, and especially your giving to Christ's ministry of healing through our church. The fancy word for that duty and delight is "stewardship," the care of what God has given you as individuals and families, and us together as the church. Normally, we focus in on stewardship in the month of May, but as Torre mentioned earlier in the service, the Council takes delight in its duty to keep an eye on the comings and goings of our resources, and in doing so, has decided to bring this gentle, mid-year opportunity to respond to the healing Christ has done in each of us by reflecting on our giving, as a way for some to be more intentional about it, and others to be more generous about it. Since last May, we've experienced the blessing of having quite a nice number of new people join us at ECF, all of whom are already giving something to the church, but perhaps not yet in a formal or regular kind of way. And at the same time, we have the blessing of a long-term,

faithful, and solid core that gives formally, but whom we also ask from time to time to consider if God might be calling them to share a little more generously. To put it in the terms I've been offering tonight, from those who delight we hope for a sense of duty in giving, and from those with a sense of duty, we hope for some delight in giving. Together we'll fulfill both our duty and our delight to be God's stewards, healed and ready to serve like Gladys.

I'm going to ask our ushers to hand out some slips of paper. And some pencils. Each slip has two sides, and one of those sides applies to you. One side has the words, Escazú Christian Fellowship Estimate of Giving Card, and that's the side for people who have not shared with us previously an estimate of your giving. We call it an estimate rather than a pledge because we want you to know that it is not a binding contract, that we won't hunt you down at the end of the year saying, "Where's our money?" We know that circumstances change, and that sometimes we are not able to fulfill our best intentions. So it is an estimate, not a pledge, and estimate that helps plan and guide our ministry. And that leads us to the other side of the card, the one that says, "ECF Mid-Year Generosity Review Card," and that is for the people who have already put down on paper what they thought God was calling them to give. And the same issue of changing circumstances applies to that group of people, and we know that things change during the year, both financially, and in your hearts, that may be prompting you to revise the estimate of your giving,

possibly downward, but hopefully upward, to share a little more as we are Christ's heart, hands, and voice in our community.

We know we haven't given you any advance warning that we would be asking you to reflect on this matter, and so, if in good conscience, you are not able to fill in the side of the card that pertains to you, we most certainly understand. But we do want to give everyone the opportunity at least to reflect on what Torre shared earlier, and the healing you and Gladys have experienced in your lives, and so for the next few minutes, as you enjoy some music that hopefully helps your reflection, feel free to fill out the appropriate side of the card, and at the end of that time, we'll pass around a basket. There's no need to come forward, like we sometimes do. If you're not ready to offer your intention tonight, feel free to bring that card any other Sunday, and simply enjoy this time to reflect on your duty and delight in general. If you are a visitor here tonight, of course we don't expect a card from you but we covet your ongoing prayers for our ministry.

Friends, whether for you it is the duty of delight or the delight of duty, may we all respond to Christ's healing in service as did Gladys that day. Amen.



Escazú Christian Fellowship Estimate of Giving Card

As an expression of my trust in God's love, and out of the abundance God has given me, I am/we are pleased to share generously with the church for the ministry of Jesus Christ.

**I/We believe God is calling me/us to offer \$ _____
per _____ (week, month, etc.) to ECF's efforts to be the heart, hands,
and voice of Christ in our community.**

Name: _____
I understand that this amount is an estimate and may be adjusted higher or lower according to my circumstances.



ECF Mid-Year Generosity Review Card

**Yes, I/We believe God is calling me/us to offer \$ _____ MORE
per _____ (week, month, etc.) to ECF's efforts to be the heart, hands, and
voice of Christ in our community.**

No, at this time, I am/we are not able to give at a greater level.

Name: _____
I understand that this amount is an estimate and may be adjusted higher or lower according to my circumstances.