

# Sermon for Sunday, February 4, 2018 - "We Are Raised Up"

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany  
February 4, 2018  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus who heals us.

This story about Simon's mother-in-law got me thinking about my own mother-in-law, Judy, and a time when she needed healing. Some years ago, my in-laws, Judy and John, were in a car accident while they were traveling to be with us all at Christmas.

Judy's injuries weren't life threatening but they were serious enough to land her in a hospital in Kansas City for quite a while. She endured lots of physical pain but what was even harder for Judy was being separated from her family, especially at Christmas. Family means everything to her, so not being with all of us was really devastating. The rest of us missed Judy and John terribly and felt powerless to help from so far away.

Illnesses and injuries are challenging enough as they plague our minds, bodies and spirits. Yet, what often makes such ailments even harder is the way they can disrupt our connections to community and diminish our sense of purpose in life.

Good Shepherd members who are homebound or living in nursing homes know this experience on a deep level. But they aren't alone in this. Physical and mental illnesses of all kinds can lead us to feel like we're cut off from others and unable to contribute to the world around us. This can lead to us feeling cut off from God as well.

That was probably a big part of what was happening for Simon's mother-in-law the day that Simon brought Jesus to her house. (I so wish she'd been called by her name in this story but that's another whole issue). She had a fever, which to us may not sound like a big deal - just take a little Tylenol, maybe get some antibiotics. Yet in the ancient world fevers often ended with death. So, as she lay there in bed she was probably pretty fearful. The isolation she faced may have been even worse. Back then there was a very heavy social cost to illness.

People who were sick and unable to carry out their roles in the community weren't able to be honored as valuable members of their households, towns or villages. This was a big deal in ancient societies that emphasized honor and shame. It would have been both the role and the honor of this woman to show hospitality to Jesus when he entered her home. Yet, illness kept her from doing this valued work that integrated her into her world. It also prevented her from gathering with her faith community at the synagogue. So, this dear woman was laid very low that day.

But then Jesus came into her bedroom, took her by her hand and raised her up. In the Gospel reading earlier we heard that "Jesus lifted her up" but that's a bad translation! The Greek word used here actually means raised up - it's the same as the word used to describe Jesus' resurrection. This word conveys the

sense that new strength is imparted to those laid low by illness, unclean spirits, or even death, so that they may rise up to take their place in the world again.

This same word is used throughout the healing stories in the book of Mark - the people who are healed are raised up. This work of raising people seems to be the main goal of Jesus' healing work. His main focus isn't the elimination of illness but the renewal of life as God's kingdom comes among us. Jesus works to raise and renew people for lives of service in community.

Speaking of service, I know it sounds strange that right after the fever left this woman, she began to serve the men. It sounds like a major gender stereotype - like some bad TV sitcom with a guy in a recliner yelling at his wife, "I don't care if you've been sick, I want supper now."

But the Greek here is important too. The word to describe the way she serves is diakoneo - the word we translate as deacon. Jesus used the word about himself when he said he came to serve rather than be served. He calls all of his disciples to this type of service. And, the church uses this word for those who lead others in the ministry of service. Simon's mother-in-law isn't some sitcom caricature. She's the first person in Mark's gospel who exemplifies true Christ-like discipleship and service. When she is raised up, her life of service is renewed and reframed. She serves not only because it's her role, she serves in response to what Jesus has done for her.

The risen Jesus is still in the business of raising people up. He comes to us even today to raise us to new life. Yet it can be hard for us to know this when Jesus doesn't walk into our bedrooms, take our hands and raise us up. That's why we need the gift of baptism and reminders of baptism so that we can experience this renewal. In baptism, we are assured that just as Jesus was raised from the dead, we too are raised to new life in Christ. This does not mean that illness and suffering are eliminated from our lives. It does mean that those things don't have the power to cut us off from God, from community or from the renewal of our lives.

We are not defined by the things that ail us. Instead, our lives are defined by what God does for us - by the way God names, forgives, and renews us each new day. Baptism draws us into the broken and blessed community of the church, the community where we can experience hands reaching out to raise us up and can offer our hands to others. Even when we face illness and can't do the things we once did, we can still serve others in new ways. Sometimes the most important service is to bear witness to the ways God renews our lives even in the midst of suffering.

The healing and new life Jesus gives doesn't mean the eradication of all illness. It didn't mean that even for Simon's mother-in-law. The fever went away that day, but she died eventually, as did everyone Jesus healed and raised up. Sickness, suffering and death still persist but because of Jesus, they do not have ultimate power over us. We are raised new each day now and forever. We are renewed for lives of service in community.

Thanks be to God.