

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany (Epiphany 5B) – February 8, 2015
Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

**The Daily Grind versus the Ground of Meaning—Rising up and Serving—
Investing “each moment with its full weight of eternity”**

So, I'll start today's homily with a simple question; what is the meaning of life? Your life? My life? What is it that determines whether you and I face this day as simply another page in the daily *grind*, or as the moment where we rediscover the very *ground* of our meaning and purpose of our existence? What will today reveal—the daily *grind*, or the ultimate *ground*?

In our gospel reading from Mark we are given a picture of the everyday life of Jesus. Having become immersed in the fullness of the human condition, Jesus finds meaning and purpose in his everyday life by proclaiming through word and deed the good news of God making all things right—repairing broken hearts, minds and bodies, and restoring all to right relationship—and bringing all things into union and communion. In his own words, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). For some, a sign of that good news was shown by Jesus through his acts of healing that day—like Peter's mother-in-law (vv. 29-31), and the numerous others Jesus heals at sunset (vv. 32-34). For others, the good news took the form of Jesus' gift of forgiveness and the freedom of a new beginning. For still others, Jesus' good news meant the beginning of the end of the reign of evil, sin and death.

In other words, Jesus found meaning in his days by restoring meaning and purpose into the lives of others, in healing the sick, forgiving those who “fell short of the mark,” and confronting evil in all its manifestations (personal and societal). Integral to all this going on each day was the fact that Jesus' dedication to this meaningful work could have, but did not, exact a serious toll on his energies and outlook. So, for example, when the crowds clamored for a king, and when those in need of healing were too numerous to count—and when others would attempt to thwart Jesus' purpose for their own political or religious ends—Jesus prayed. Only in frequent and solitary communion with God—albeit often interrupted—could he keep his goals clearly in view, his priorities straight and his energies renewed, in order to maintain his balance and not lose sight of his purpose.

We are called to join the living Christ as we serve the needs of others, forgive wrongs, and heal in various ways; and inspired and empowered by Christ's Holy Spirit we can preach the good news by word and deed, and pray for the continual strength to confront those evils in our hearts and in our world which rob life of its meaning and purpose. Joined with the Living Christ in his ongoing mission—in prayer and in action—the daily grind of everyday life can become the very ground of our meaning.

In our gospel today we are given a couple of lessons in discipleship and empowerment which are also part of Jesus' meaning and purpose for all of us. Let's look at the brief story of the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law—a little story that can be easily

overlooked. First of all, an image of resurrection is incorporated in the healing, since the same Greek verb is used both for Jesus' action in raising her up, and for Jesus' being raised up at the end of Mark's gospel (14:28, 16:6)—unfortunately our translation in today's gospel, "lifted her up," does not capture this deeper meaning. The point is important, namely that the cure of Peter's mother-in-law foreshadows and announces the saving mission of Jesus for all humankind. Healed by him, we will also be raised up by him. Like Peter's mother-in-law, we who have been healed and who yearn to be raised up with him in glory, are to find our deepest meaning during our lifetimes in the service of others.

And on that note, there's more here: Simon Peter's mother-in-law, being raised up, gives herself over to serving. The word used here does not mean that she got out of bed and cooked them dinner and did the dishes and everything else. The word used here does not refer to womanly servitude. The verb used here for "serve"—the Greek word *diakonein*—is the word "to minister." This was a term used to describe the ministry of the early Christians, a ministry that later evolved into the diaconate. In this context of Mark's gospel, the first woman referred to in this earliest gospel is the first true disciple, marked by a willingness to serve. Again, Simon's mother-in-law becomes the first person of whom this ministerial verb is used. This same verb "to serve" recurs in Mark's gospel in the tenth chapter as the vocation of Jesus (10:45), and in the fifteenth chapter to describe the faithful women present at the crucifixion (15:41). There is a significant irony here! The Church through the centuries has always raised up, as it were, Simon Peter as the first minister, the preeminent disciple, the "rock" upon which the Church was built, the first pope—even the great precedent for celibate priesthood, albeit that Peter the first pope had to have been married if he had a mother-in-law—go figure! And for centuries the Church fostered male leadership and female servitude as divinely ordained. But the earliest gospel, in its original Greek, designates Peter's mother-in-law as the first minister, and holds as models of discipleship and leadership many other women who assertively break boundaries and defy repressive social codes that blow apart notions of male above female, the "holy" above the "unclean," and Jew above Gentile or vice versa. Additional examples are in the fifth (5:25-34), seventh (7:24-30), tenth (10:29-30), and fourteenth (14:3-9) chapters of Mark as well.

The power of this brief story and these few verses until quite recently have been usurped by long centuries of Church teaching on male hierarchy and female servitude. Shoveling that aside, as it were, we have uncovered a beautiful gem this morning—about meaning, about empowerment, about all of us being raised up to serve the Lord all our days.

Finally, it's important to note that Mark was intent that his readers understand that each of Jesus' eventful and meaningful days such as the one we read about today was, in effect, at least a preview of, and partial realization of, the long-awaited Day of the Messiah. Foretold by the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 35:5-6; 61:1-2) that day, that Final Day, will be marked by miraculous healings, celebration, as well as by a reckoning between the forces of good and evil. Mark includes all of these elements in his account of Jesus' day-to-day journeys. The great and Final Day can be previewed in each of Jesus' days and can be found in each of ours as well. Listen to how the Glenstal Missal puts it:

“Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down....’ Once again...this cry reaches towards God, borne up by the assurance that our salvation has been achieved, though not yet fully worked out. This is because our God is a God who comes, and Jesus Christ is fully involved in this coming: ‘He is, he was and he is to come.’...Faced with the prospect of this Second Coming which can neither be predicted or prevented, faced with this lengthy vigil in the night of this world, whose end remains in darkness, the best thing for us to do is to remain always on the alert [and to live in full expectancy of the unexpected]. We must accept fully our responsibility with regard to our times and invest each moment with its full weight of eternity...Christians thus become the watchdogs of the world, a thorn in their century's side, overcoming sleep and igniting hope [and expectancy]; Come Lord Jesus!”ⁱ

ⁱ Gerard Macginty, ed., Glenstal Bible Missal (London: Collins, 1983).