

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Fr. Samuel Springuel

4 February, 2024

1st Reading Job 7:1–4,6–7

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 147:1–2,3–4,5–6

2nd Reading 1 Corinthians 9:16–19,22–23

Gospel Mark 1:29–39

There are days, weeks even, where I feel like my schedule is so crammed full of stuff I need to do that there really isn't enough time in the day to get it all done. If I'm not running down to the School to prepare for class, teach class, or do the grading that said classes inevitably generate, then I'm up here in the Monastery doing all the same things, except for the grading, as Novice Master. On top of that, I've got homilies to prepare, masses to say, offices to attend, confessions to hear, candles to make, laundry to do, supplies to keep stocked, and probably a dozen different other little things that come up every once in a while but still need to get done in order to keep things running smoothly. It is, all in all, a hectic way to live, and I thus found Fr. Augustine's latest holy card to be something of a cathartic laugh when he gave it to me earlier this week: St. James the Dismembered, patron saint of the chronically stressed, or to put it more colloquially of being pulled in too many different directions at once.

And yet, within this myriad of tasks that keeps me so busy I find myself antsy at times, unable to concentrate on what I'm doing because it's taking so long. Surely I could be making better use of this time, getting something done, rather than just waiting for whatever it is I'm currently stuck on to make just a bit more incremental progress. Unlike Job, this doesn't usually happen to me at night. By the time my day ends I'm tired enough that I physically can't lie awake pondering the things that I didn't get done that day, the tasks that I left unfinished or forgot. Instead it's more like the middle of the afternoon, when I'm faced with the fact that there simply isn't enough time left in the day to accomplish everything that I put on my todo list. I have to make some decisions about what I am going to finish that day and what I'm going to put off, and in that moment it is the important things that go really slowly which are the hardest to focus on. It is so much more gratifying to check off several small easy tasks than to just take one more step on a larger project.

And then, of course, there are the needs of self-care. I have to admit that the only exercise I've been getting recently is walking while I listen to an audio

Bible as part of my *lectio divina* for this year. Indeed, I'm less than two weeks away from finishing that Bible In a Year program and the idea of going back to actually reading for *lectio* (a word which means "reading") has me worried that I'll be getting even less exercise just when my doctors are telling me that I need to add some swimming to my routine in order to help manage my chronic neck pain. When am I going to find the time to go to the pool, or even get back on my bike or roller skis? I know I'll feel physically better if I take the time to exercise, but it feels like such a waste of time; time when I'm not accomplishing anything on my overly long todo list. If I don't make the time to exercise and relax, however, I'll work myself sick before too long.

And I wonder if that isn't what happened to Peter's mother-in-law. The Gospel tells us she was in bed with a fever without telling us why, but it's interesting to me that after Jesus heals her she immediately goes to work serving table. I know that when I get sick, it bothers me that things I would normally be doing aren't getting done. And when I'm finally well again, I immediately start prioritizing how to get caught back up. Might Peter's mother-in-law have been in the same boat? Could she have been working so hard tending to family and guests that she fell sick? Was she spending her time in her sick bed worrying about who was making the dinner, cleaning the house, fetching water from the well, buying food from the market, and all the other household tasks she wasn't doing? Why, when Jesus cured her, did she not take the time to thank him or even ask who this man was? Did she really need to get back to work so quickly?

Of course, if Simon's mother-in-law is the consummate hostess, then perhaps serving table is her way of thanking the man who just cured her of a fever that had her bed ridden. Like Martha, she might very well express her emotions through her works. Her gratitude for being made well, her relief at no longer feeling the pain and discomfort of a fever, her joy at being out of that bed, all of this might very well come out in the care she is now able to show to her son-in-law and his guests. She may very well live the love language of service, making people feel cared for, feel like they are worth something, have value, by taking the time to do something for them. She is quite literally giving Jesus a cold cup of water, as well as bread, wine, and meat. The littlest things, done for the least, are done for him.

Further, when I read the Gospel more closely, I notice that it doesn't actually say that Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law of her fever. Certainly that is implied when it says "the fever left her", but what it actually says that Jesus does is that "he grasped her hand and helped her up." While we might envision this as the bare minimum, reaching down and pulling her up out of her bed, after all the verb translated as "help up" literally means "to raise up," I would suggest that a broader interpretation would also be appropriate. This same verb is regularly used in the New Testament to refer to raising up someone's standard of living: to drawing someone into a better way of life. Is it too much to say that when he raised her up, Jesus did more for Simon's mother-in-law, raising her up not only physically, but emotionally, mentally, spiritually as well? In reaching out and grasping her hand Jesus said I see you, I appreciate you, I love you more than you could know. I will help you, if you let me. Let me

take your yoke and you take mine, for mine is easy, my burden light. Fret not over the little things, not because they don't matter, but because the love they convey is so much bigger than you have realized.

The Gospel never names Peter's mother-in-law, nor his wife, nor any of his family besides his brother Andrew, but there is a legend that Peter was married to Herod the Great's granddaughter. Yes, the same King Herod who killed all the baby boys under the age of 2 in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus. In this legend his mother-in-law was Glaphys of Cappadocia, the Jewish wife of Alexander, one of his two sons that Herod the Great had assassinated for fear they would overthrow him. She was known to be a gossip, a commensurate pot-stirrer within her highly dysfunctional family who was famous for having many affairs and marriages, both before and after she met with Jesus. If that's the case, then we can say that sadly the healing which Jesus offered to her was ultimately refused. If she served our Lord, it was out of obligation, because it was what was expected of her as a mother-in-law living in Simon's house. She defined herself by her lineage, her proximity to power, and must have found that period of time when she was living in the house of a fisherman to be quite the humiliation. She must have worked very hard to find a "suitable" marriage that allowed her to escape the backwater that was Capernaum, never realizing, let alone acknowledging, that she had been given a privileged opportunity to serve the Most High God come into the form of a lowly carpenter from Nazareth.

This version of the story is a sad one, one that we would happily sweep under the rug as a "mere legend," probably not true, which only attempts to make Peter greater than the simple fisherman that he was. An attempt to make the Church's origins more prestigious, more connected in human terms, rather than focusing on the connection that really matters, the one to the Son of God. However, I think it's also a warning. Jesus came to Glaphys in all her misery, in all her worldliness, in all her preoccupation with status and power and offered her his hand, not just to pull her up physically, but to pull her out of her preoccupations and into a life that was ordered towards the one thing necessary: a relationship with him. She refused and faded into history, her life after this encounter not much different from what it was before. Today that hand of Jesus is held out to us. He is offering to pull us up, to bring us out of ourselves and into himself. What remains is for us to decide: will we let him? Will we cooperate with the life he wants for us, one that will bring us into eternal life with him? Or will we, like Glaphys, remain preoccupied with our worldly concerns? Will we use his hand to stand, and then let go, turn our back, and stay locked into this passing life in all its futility?