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“We’ve Got the Fever”

A sermon by Cherrie B. Henry

Mark 1.29-39
February 8, 2009

It’s been some years now,
but I remember
 sitting on the porch at St. Joseph Boy’s Home in Haiti
 with a group of students,
 listening to Fr. Desire, the first translator of the Bible into Haitian Creole,
 speaking about his beloved Haiti.
What I remember best is a Haitian proverb he quoted to illustrate a point.

The proverb was simply,
 “The fever is not in the sheets.”

The fever is not in the sheets.

Fr. Desire was talking about politics at that point.
In particular he was talking about political relations between the US and Haiti.

He was talking about
the endless ways in which we avoid the hard work.
 “You can change the sheets, but that will not get rid of the fever,”
 he said.
The fever is in us – not in the sheets.
We will not get better until we address ourselves.

The scripture lesson for today,
talks about the human fever.

It is first addressed directly with the physical fever Jesus heals
for Simon’s mother-in-law.
You know how it goes:

Jesus and his newly called disciples arrive
at the home of Simon and Andrew.
They host Jesus into their house
only to find Simon's mother-in-law sick with a fever.

It isn't clear whether Simon and Andrew invite Jesus in
with the idea that he might do a little healing on
Simon's feverish mother-in-law
or if that was something they happen to discover
only once they get there.

I imagine the scene much like the one that happened in my house last week
when our friend and computer guru, Ren
appeared at our door to pick up something,
found himself talking for a while and, probably before he knew it,
was drawn in by Andy to look at
an old Mac computer that was ailing. You know the rest,
30 minutes later . . . unfortunately, Ren was not Jesus in this case,
but you know the situation!

However it happened, we know Simon pleads his mother-in-law's case to Jesus.
Jesus is willing to oblique.
He takes the mother-in-law's hot, fevered hand
into his cool, healing one
and Simon's mother-in-law is restored not just to health;
but, as modern scholars are emphatic to let us know,
because it is theologically important;
she is restored to her place in the community!
She gets up and serves supper to the guest!

Some of us might have problems
with that notion of her getting up and serving supper.
Maybe is our fears of sexism raising it's ugly head,
or maybe don't like thinking of ourselves as being *merely* useful
and though we might value humility,
we're a little fearful of the humiliation it can so easily tip over into
when servanthood becomes servitude.

Still, we should note
that Jesus is clear:
When one is saved servanthood is the joyous thank you;
a humbling and not humiliating act
good enough for girls *and* boys;
lifegiving work that we are called to be about.

Have you ever known that sort of serving?

I think I have.
It happens when you've been trapped
physically with an illness in bed or
in some other more existential way
when there comes joyous release and you get up and do the most routine things--
tasks you normally do and maybe even grump about—
only the don't make you grumpy.
And you see, really see, how taking out the trash is a privilege!
Making supper is a joy!

We are freed to serve,
Paul says in the Corinthians passage for today.
John Calvin said
that if we are saved only
for our own sakes, then ours is a theology of selfishness.
We are saved to serve!
It is our easiest and most heartfelt thank you.
It is perfect freedom.

Scripture says the Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law
And she got up and served them.
The Greek word for servant used here is "diakonia."
It is the very same word
that Jesus would use again and again
to instruct his disciples in the work they too are to be about.
Again and again, in Mark the servanthood of women
will model this ideal of Jesus.
First here with Simon's mother-in-law serving a meal,
later to the woman who bathes Jesus' feet with oil,
still later to the women who prepared Jesus body after the crucifixion.
Over and over again Jesus point's to this work, this service
and tells the disciples that is the work they are to be about.
And that Greek word "diaconia" will become the root for our word "Deacon."
It's meaning continues even today in our office deacon.

But that brings us to another part of the story,
and other fevers.
For as the text goes on we find that Simon's mother in law is not
the only feverish one around.
In fact, there is a whole city full of folks
who come to Simon's door as the evening sun sets
in need of healing from fevers of every kind –
physical, emotional, mental, relational, communal, spiritual –
you name it. They've got it!
Jesus patiently heals many scripture says.
And the story then moves on.

The sunsets and with the morning sun
we find that Jesus has slipped away to do a bit of praying.
And for the first time in the Gospel of Mark
we begin to get a look a
the fever with which the disciples might be suffering.

In Mark's text
we find the disciples literally
hunting Jesus down.
Once they find him they are bold to interrupt his praying
to let him know that
"Everyone is searching for you."

You can hear it in the text can't you.
The disciples are feverish!
They want him back on the job and they him on it now.
They probably want to tell Jesus what to do too.
Those disciples have ideas and plans!
They want to direct Jesus.
Tell him who to heal and where.
And well, who can blame them?
I've certainly had such fevers, haven't you?

Fortunately, they don't get too far.
For Jesus is not going to be their wishing well.
He has something else in mind, something deeper
farther reaching, of more consequence.

In today's lesson as surely as we find that Jesus heals,
we also find that Jesus has an agenda of his own.
It is his agenda that presses
those disciples on to the next village,
where he will again proclaim the Kingdom of God
and do more healing.

Jesus is always one step ahead of them.
Mysterious as healing itself.
Always leaving us wondering.

As this particular story closes we can find ourselves wondering
about the mixed bag the story gives us.
There is Simon's mother-in-law fever cured
along with many others who came to Simon's door.
There are others who obviously did not get close enough
to be healed.
And there are feverish disciples are on their way to healing,

but a long ways from it at this point.

We don't know what to make of such a mixed bag,
except to acknowledge that it seems to be so -- even today.
Jesus heals many fevers, some fevers are left unhealed
and there are other disciples who seem to be on their way to
better health even though their fevers are far from over.

And in the end friends,
whether we like it or not,
Jesus seems to have a different agenda
than we do.

Let me tell you a story that might illustrate what I mean:

In Campus Ministry, and in life in general
I am privileged to regularly watch fevers rescind.

There is one I watch annually
because it is so easy to see and monitor
happens around our spring break mission trips.

Mission trips are complicated. Let's admit it.
The whole notion of serving another whether her or somewhere else
is from the beginning a set up for the
the fevers of pride and the desire to do too much, too fast,
for the wrong ends.
I can't think of a single mission team
I've ever been on that hasn't struggled with this particular fever.
Likewise, the countries where we travel are fevered with
corrupt governing officials, histories of injustice and violence, and
people whose self-esteem and despair of evident everywhere --
and that says nothing of the physical fevers
that come with diseases like malaria, malnutrition, TB and AIDs.

All in all, you wouldn't think much could happen
when you put two such sets of fevered people together except
that our woes would multiply and the human disease of sin would increase --
and history has proved, that can happen when we decide we are Jesus
rather than Jesus' disciples -- leaders rather than servants.

Still, when Jesus leads, I must testify that I have seen
a lot of fevers on both sides become cooled.
It happens then and there,
and sometimes it happens years later.
Let me give you just one example of what I mean.

A few years ago,
one of my former students shared with me a bit of reflective writing
she had done for a Medical Ethics writing class.
By way of background you need to know that Susannah first went to Puentos de Cristo
(Bridges of Christ)
in Reynosa, Mexico as part of a mission team
of 27 Duke, UNC, and NCSU students.
The experience was important to her
and she went on to spend a summer between
her junior and senior years there
as well as, another year long stint as a Volunteer in Mission with our denomination
serving in Reynosa
before entering medical school.
The piece I want to read to comes from her experience as a medical student.
She writes:

[Susannah's work – see bottom of sermon]

Susannah's words speak to me of
a fever that is coming down.
It is perhaps not altogether gone away,
but it is definitely cooling
as she begins to see her identity and usefulness
much broader than that of just one more trained professional.

Her words also speak of another's fever subsiding,
that of a dying Mexican woman whose illness
might have her believe that she was no longer useful in the world
but whose prayers and friendship with a young physician more than half her age
extends her quality of life while enabling the quality of care
others will receive from that same doctor in the years to come.

To many it might not seem like much,
but in a world where our very birth
can invite us into the world of an elite education
or third world poverty
it seems to me nothing short of a miracle!

Friends,
though we can't predict, or manipulate it,
we know that Jesus can heal the fevers of our lives.
No wonder we're hunting him down; searching desperately for him.
And friends he is not hiding nor is he running from us.
He does heal us – many, not all, but many.
And in the early morning
he slips away.

And whether we got healed the day before or not,
we can all find him in deserted places praying for us.

We want to tell him what to do,
but that is not our place.
Our place is to follow him
on to other places and deeper understandings
of just how widespread this fever is.
How we to are stricken by it.
How many, many places it hides.
How many forms healing love can take.

We've got the fever ya'll!
But friends I proclaim to you this day,
that this fever is not in the sheets and it won't be in us forever either!
The Kingdom of God is at hand!
Jesus is on the move. And yes, some little "f" fevers are being healed,
but more importantly, the big "F" fever –
the fever of human alienation and sin – is going down.
And at long last the warmth we are feeling for once is not fever,
but rather the love of God and the fellowship of the Kingdom of Heaven!
Is anyone feeling well enough to make supper yet?
Amen.

Susannah Nicholson
Medical Ethics and Humanities
Reflective Commentary on Wit

Hiding

Behind the charade
Of taps and knocks,
Thumps and thuds,
Is a heart
Full of past sorrows
And joys
Yearning to connect
With the heart confronting it.
Behind the plastic lenses
So carefully filtering
Data from the surrounding
Environment,
Are two eyes
Full of longing
To see the world and
Its beauty,
To see the soul within
The two eyes staring back
Through the filters.
Behind the clenched lip
Biting the lower lip,
Is a mouth
Willing a smile and
Imprisoning the words
Desiring to escape
That will reveal
Who I am.

My shift ends, and I am ready to leave the hospital. An Ultimate Frisbee game is waiting for me to relieve the week's stress. I am on my way out of the hospital when I remember a promise I made at 5:30 AM. The decision to leave the hospital is suddenly weighed against the knowledge that I cannot break my promise. I return to the elevator acknowledging that Ultimate Frisbee will not be a reality this week. Soon I am on the

seventh floor and standing outside of Mrs. M's room. Her husband immediately spots me in the doorway and greets me with a warm smile. I turn to Mrs. M, and smile, knowing I have made the right decision to return. I grasp her hand, and soon the three of us are deep in conversation. We talk about our homes and our families. Mr. M points to some brilliant yellow and red roses in the window. He tells me, as his wife's face lights up with pride, that he brought her rose garden to her from Eagle Pass, a town along the United States/Mexico border, because she could not be in her garden. I stare at the roses, as the sun shines through the window, and remember my year as a volunteer in Reynosa, Mexico, a city of one million that lies just across the border from the United States. For a moment, I am back in Reynosa, and Mrs. M is my friend, one of my "Mexican Moms."

I inherited Mrs. M as my patient on Gyn Service B a week earlier from a friend. He related to me that she was very nice and... dying. Mrs. M has metastatic ovarian cancer and is at the end of therapy. Every day I have entered Mrs. M's room to check and change the dressings on her open abdominal wounds. Metastatic ovarian cancer with stool draining from an open abdominal wound and multiple other orifices is not always the easiest way to start a day at 5:00 AM. Mr. and Mrs. M, however, always welcome me when I enter and disturb them from any sort of hospital slumber they are managing at the time. I chat with them as I examine Mrs. M and her wounds. Mrs. M, stoic and brave, never ceases to be patient with me. My early morning pre-round routine ends by holding her hand. When the resident, who is often rushed and does not speak Spanish, arrives to see Mrs. M with me, the visits become more impersonal as I stand back and quietly observe.

So on this particular morning, I was in a hurry and did not have an opportunity to chat with Mrs. M. I am not sure what made me ask her if she would like for me to return. Maybe I sensed that she needed me, someone on her healthcare team to talk to her as a person. Maybe I sensed that I needed her. I do not know, but the words came out of my mouth in the quiet, darkness of her room on that early morning. A promise is a promise.

Our conversation is not particularly profound or enlightening, but it is special. For a short time, Mrs. M is not a patient anymore. She is just Mrs. M. And for a brief time, I am not a medical student anymore, I am Susannah. I am her friend. After several hours, a nurse arrives. Our time has ended. I hold Mrs. M's hand and she prays with me and for me—not for herself. As I wave goodbye and close her door, I fight the tears that have been struggling to form since I walked into her room.

Since that time, I have not had the desire to look up Mrs. M's chart. I know she has died. However, I also know that she still lives. She lives through the memories of her husband, her children, her family, her friends, and her church. Mrs. M lives through me. At the time, I did not truly understand how significant of an impact my interaction with Mrs. M would have on my life or my medical career. Since that afternoon in

her room, I have come to understand the significance of my encounter with her. While standing and conversing in Spanish with Mrs. M, a strong, beautiful, courageous woman dying of metastatic ovarian cancer, I was being her doctor. I was being the doctor I so deeply desire to become. Most importantly, though, I will always remember Mrs. M as my friend.