

## “Deacon What’s-Her-Name”

Sermon, Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:29-39

Let’s travel back in time to the home where Simon and his brother Andrew live. We don’t know Simon’s wife’s name, but we do know that her mother lives with them. And wait! We don’t know her name either. Well, she can join the club of so many biblical women whose names were forgotten. If I could go back to this house where Simon and Andrew live, and meet her, I would ask her three questions:

- 1) What is your name?
- 2) What did your encounter with Jesus mean to you?
- 3) Tell me more about your call to service.

These are three questions that are probably good to ask around here, too. They are timeless enough. The first question is a basic one that people feel shy to ask. We are a small church-- many people say we are like a family. How can you not know your family members’ names? But it is true that some of us are admittedly awkward about learning names. There is the common problem of asking someone’s name once, then forgetting, but because you have seen that person at church and spoken to one another 6 times since you first asked, you do not want to expose yourself by asking the name of someone who is starting to feel like a friend. And then we are of course a blend of cultures here, with a magnificent mix of names. Our tongues and lips still find the contours of each other’s names unfamiliar-- and yet it does not take long at all for an unfamiliar name to become a pattern regular to our speech. And so we try to learn not only each other’s

English names, but also their real names, if these two are not the same. If you are drawn to someone in this church but feel bad you do not know their name, have no fear: next week at our Annual Meeting, we will have a Name Amnesty and make everyone wear a name tag! You can be forgiven for your forgetfulness and tongue-clumsiness and start fresh. Be prepared to take notice and pay attention!

People are probably also shy to ask the second question too. “What did your encounter with Jesus mean to you?” We live in the Northeast, where people value their privacy. We do not want to intrude, and do not want to be intruded upon. And I am from the South, where people are perfectly comfortable being up in each other’s business, but the problem with questioning someone about their encounter or relationship with Jesus implies a certain amount of judginess. You might as well ask, “So when were you saved?”-- a question which, coming from the Bible belt, needed to be answered according to a certain sort of formula in order to pass muster, in order to get approval. Since I don’t see salvation as the *only* point of my faith in Jesus, I never knew how to answer that question.

But there is good reason to not shy away from this question. In a way, the asking is a way of touching someone else, just as Jesus touched and healed when he lifted the woman by the hand. Sure, it is risky to ask someone something personal, and we certainly don’t want to be disrespectful or invasive of someone’s need for space. But, commentator P.J. Ennis wrote, “Love not expressed, love not felt, is difficult to trust....God knew the human need for nearness. Jesus is the incarnation of God's love, which makes it all the more demanding (if frightening) to realize that for some people, we are the only Jesus they will ever meet.”<sup>1</sup> So, we can boldly risk getting to know others at the places that involve trust, for those might be the places where God may be most seen and felt. And, we must safeguard that trust so that it is never used for harm.

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 1*

One thing I am interested to know about other Christians is whether their Christian faith helped with a transformation in their lives, or whether it helped them become even more of themselves.

I am interested in Simon's mother-in-law's response to her encounter with Jesus, which heals her. Was her act of service a return to her old self, a sign of restoration to the life she knew? Or was it a transformative response of gratitude?

The fever that had bound her to her bed left her, and she began to serve those gathered in the house. Who else reads that and wonders, "REALLY?!" The poor woman has been so sick she was bedridden, and the first thing she does after Jesus makes her better is serve up some bread and wine? What I want is at least the contrast, like we see in the story of Mary and Martha-- Martha who serves and Mary who sits at Jesus' feet, oblivious to the work that needs to be done.

If this woman fell more into the Martha role, I do not want to see her as a victim. I want to know what her service meant to her. If I imagine myself in this house, and notice this woman, I also wonder what Jesus was doing. Perhaps Jesus watched her keenly, noticing how she set the table, and broke the bread, and poured the wine, and said the blessings. Perhaps Simon and Andrew, James and John noticed just how she went about her service-- and the Greek word is *diakonei*, which is the word we get Deacon from. Perhaps this woman offered the blueprint for the ministries of the church. Cuban theologian Dr. Ofelia Ortega suggests, "This woman gets up and turns the Sabbath day into a paschal day of service to others. Jesus does not command her. She is the one that assumes the initiative and awaits the consequences, discovering the value of mutual service above the sacredness of the Sabbath."<sup>2</sup>

The prophet in Isaiah says hopeful things about those who wait upon the Lord: "they shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like

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<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 1*

eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” I asked our local bird watcher Nancy Salvati to tell me a little more about eagles. We had 5 in Overpeck Park last spring, and Nancy tells me there is a pair of eagle mates that return each year to Ridgefield to make a nest for their April young. This January Nancy saw them pass overhead; she told me, “the air above was charged with majesty as the birds cast a wonderful shadow over all watching.”

I would sure like to mount up with wings like eagles, but the more realistic struggle for me is to run and not grow weary, and I imagine there will come a point in my life where my goal is to walk and not faint. Our answers to the call to serve Jesus may look like any of these three.

Yesterday, after I watched in wonder as my dog walk in circles nine times, as if clearing away the grass, before settling herself in her dog bed, I shared my observation on Facebook and asked my friends what ordinary things they would like to celebrate. I was not looking for stories of your children getting a part in a Broadway musical or for the book you just got published. Instead, I heard about my friends who:

Piled together with the whole family in the living room by the fire, because the heat went out

Cleaned lots of dishes and poop today, and kept them separate

Remembered to bring in the old travel coffee mugs from the minivan cupholders

Woke up this morning and went to work.

Did her sister’s laundry

Took the day to lie on the couch and ended it with a pint of sherbert.

As I read each friend’s comment, I responded with some bit of affirmation for how they listened to their need for rest, or took a step towards organization, or brought their family closer together. By celebrating these little things, or even by just noticing them and having gratitude for them as gifts from God, we take time to consider how the fibres of our everyday,

ordinary lives also have room for the holy. It's nothing so magnificent as flying with wings of an eagle, but together these fibres can be woven to make a kite that can fly too, or something more useful like a sacred canopy under which we can live. With God, there is the capacity to make the ordinary holy, just as Jesus did with Deacon What's-Her-Name.

The truth is, we probably will not see people from this church going out and curing people of various diseases and casting out demons-- what I would call the soaring like eagles practices of faith. And maybe mounting up with wings like eagles won't look like the interpersonal miracles Jesus performed in his early ministry. It may be more broadly focused, such as peace between the Koreas or a reversal of global warming or a fair and achievable pathway to citizenship in this country. These needs are spiritual, as much as the need for bodily healing is also spiritual. These are the kinds of things we cannot accomplish on our own; we need each other, and we need God. But if we can attend to walking without growing faint, and sometimes running without growing weary, who knows? Our faith may be strengthened to dare the impossible. The wind may catch the the fibres of our ordinary lives like a sail and blow us to do the Spirit's call in bold ways we had not imagined for ourselves.

May Christ bless us in our walking, our running, and our soaring. Amen.