

Mark 1:29-39 (NRSV)

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

I think you have to be pretty grown up to love the readings for today. I confess that I'm not always that grown up, but the confirmation class has helped me.

Why do I say these things? Well, if you're a child of the 60's (that's the **nineteen** sixties by the way, for all the confirmands that were betting on an earlier century) – if you're a child of the 60's, you read the part where Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and you make a little face. "The fever left her and she began to serve them." Well, of course. What else would she do? The text doesn't remark on the potential sexism implied in it. I mean, the guys just got home, maybe they wanted a beer and a snack, but mother-in-law is feeling poorly.

Let's heal her up so we can get some grub and a brew and sit back and watch the game. Sigh. I know, of course, that no one in *this* congregation would make assumptions like that, but, it's a big world out there and not completely liberated yet.

The reading from Corinthians is equally distressing, although in a slightly different way. Paul writes that he has become a slave to all, so that he might save more of them. To Jews, he became a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law, he submits to the law even though he is not under the law anymore. To those outside the law he becomes an outsider to the law, even though he *is* under the law of Christ. To the weak, he becomes weak to save the weak. What the guidance counselor would say is that he's showing a fairly distressing lack of character and integrity, trying a little too hard to fit in. Trying to be all things to all people is not, in today's world, a recipe for success.

These two readings from the New Testament seem to paint a discouraging portrait of the life of a Christian. Get well, Mom, so that you can clean up the empty pizza boxes and dirty dishes. Have an extreme makeover, Paul – in fact, have a bunch of them, so that you can appeal to everyone no matter who they are. It's fair to wonder whether this is something you'd really want to sign up for.

These were the slightly gloomy things I was thinking about these texts when our confirmation class started last week. We had been talking about homelessness and about the Christian perspective on homelessness and other social problems, and the confirmands started complaining, though not in the ways that confirmands usually complain.

They were saying that it was a Christian's job to care for the homeless, because the homeless are poor and vulnerable and God asks us to protect people who are poor and vulnerable. They went on to say that they didn't think it was fair that we weren't having

Cupid's Café this year, that they wanted a chance to raise some money that they could use to help the homeless. They said that the homeless people they met during the week of our Safe Nights participation seemed nice. Wasn't there something that they could do that would let them raise money for homeless people?

Now, they knew that Cupid's Café was a lot of work and not all of it was very appealing or glamorous. A lot of it was schlepping chairs around and setting up and taking down tables, serving food and washing dishes and cleaning up. And it wasn't so much that they wanted to do Cupid's Café as they wanted to do *something* because they'd met these people who didn't seem so different from them and who needed some help. So they are talking about doing a talent show and anyone who wants to help out with that should see me after the service.

This sort of thing is, of course, precisely why teaching confirmation is such a pleasure here and why this class has become so dear to me. I think they understood Paul better than I did – they understood, as Paul did, that you couldn't really help people or save people until you know them, really know them. To know their fears and their hopes, their defeats and their triumphs, to know what moves them, what makes them like you and different from you. But they also understood something deeper -- that in the Gospel we are freed from some of the requirements of the Law, but that the freedom given by the Gospel carries with it certain other obligations.

This is a lot of what Paul has been talking about in the last few weeks of readings from Corinthians. What's at issue is the food that people are eating and whether it's OK to eat meat that was sacrificed at altars to pagan gods. Paul knows that what you eat isn't important to your relationship with God, not really. But he knows, too, that what is real to you becomes your reality, and that some of the people in his congregation were worried that eating meat from these altars would take them back to the life they'd worked so hard to get away

from. And Paul cares about his little flock so much that he's not willing to risk their progress by making use of the freedom he has gained in Christ, the freedom that comes from knowing that God's love doesn't depend on what we eat. So, he tells the church at Corinth that he won't eat the meat that comes from those altars and he doesn't think they should either.

And I began to see the common thread in Paul's letter and the story of Peter's mother-in-law and what the confirmands wanted to do. Each of them was free in a new way – Paul was freed by the love of God, Peter's mother-in-law was freed by the healing power of Christ, and the confirmands were freed by this community and the generosity of their parents. And each of them chose to give up that freedom, or more importantly, to use that freedom in a way that God hoped they would. Paul used his freedom to stay in relationship with his flock in the church at Corinth. Peter's mother-in-law used her new health to serve Jesus and the disciples. The confirmands want to use their advantages and their gifts to raise money for the homeless.

Paul has it right when he says, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel." Christian freedom is not free, no freedom is. We are freed for a purpose, we are healed for a purpose, we are given wealth and privilege and skills and talents for a purpose. If we are not free to put our freedom to use for a purpose, then we are not really free at all. If we are only free to use our freedom and health and talents and advantages for our own pleasure, for our own appetites, then we are not really free at all.

I got a nice email inquiry from a lady who thought Saint Nicholas might be a good fit for her family and wanted to know our position on tithing. I held off from simply saying, "We're in favor." What I said was that they should come visit with us and not give anything for a while, not until they got a feeling for who we were and how comfortable and how challenged they might be by making this community part of their lives. And as I think about it, I should have

added that we don't have a position on tithing, but we do have a position on Christian freedom, and that position is that we wouldn't keep you from giving more than 10% if that was what you needed to do.

We shouldn't assume that Peter's mother-in-law would serve Jesus and the disciples, but we can celebrate that she would use her returned health in that way. We shouldn't assume it, but we can celebrate that Paul would limit his dietary freedom for the sake of his friends and the Gospel. We shouldn't assume that the confirmands would give time and effort to help the homeless, but we can celebrate that they would choose to use their gifts for the good of others. The Gospel frees us to become the people God wants us to be. But freedom isn't really freedom unless you are free to put it to use.

Amen.