“In Sickness and In Health”

“There are only two ways to live your life.
One is as though nothing is a miracle.
The other is as though everything is a miracle.”
Albert Einstein

First Congregational, UCC
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Mark 1: 29-39

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 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.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ 38 He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’ 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

I have been ill, with a temperature rising above 98.6, on several occasions. Some are even memorable.

In the year 1968 I was struck with the Hong Kong Flu. Anyone remember that pandemic? It took me months to fully recover, the fever returning and returning for no apparent reason, putting me and a lot of others back into their beds with aches and pains nausea, all the symptoms we associate with a nasty form of the flu.

Of course the Hong Kong flu epidemic was not as historically significant as others. The Bubonic Plague and Fever (1348-1350) or the 1918 flu pandemic for example.
Nor was the Hong Kong Flu
as damaging as
typhoid fever, so present in the late 1800’s.

I suspect there isn’t one of you here
who has not had at sometime or another
a fever, with all its resulting
aches and pains,
and concerns about the implications.

It must have been so with Simon’s
mother in law in our scripture story today.
She too was bed ridden
I suspect her family surrounding her
gravely concerned,
that the fever might lead to worsening symptoms
even her possible death.

Of course, that is where the similarity ends
with my story and the scripture narrative.
After all, with Simon’s mother in law
Jesus appears on the scene.

He pops in like an ordinary man
and he leaves an identified hero in their midst.

Jesus merely reaches out to Simon’s fever stricken
mother in law, touches her hands
and voila!
She is healed.
Right then and there.

She is immediately cured.
Yet, her first response, well it kinda puzzles me.
The story says she pops out of bed
and starts to serve, unlike my usual response
after a high fever breaks.
She does not ask for chicken broth
or a warm soothing shower, as I would.
She doesn’t even to turn over on her plumped pillow
to snuggle down for a fever free rest.

No, not Simon’s mother-in-law.
She doesn’t ask for a mirror,
to see if she looks as bad as she feels,
Simon’s mother-in-law
doesn’t even tip toe into the bath room
and weigh herself on the scale to see
if the horrible fever resulted in a little
much needed weight loss.

I mean who hasn’t recovered from a fever and flu
only to rejoice at the five or so extra pounds
that have magically vanished?

Who hasn’t tried on their skinny jeans,
a smile lingering on their chapped, parched,
dried lips, after suffering a fever
for a few days?

It seems, Simon’s mother in law, that’s who!
For better or worse her first response
for Jesus’ laying on of hands
and removing her fever
is to......get to work!

I know.
Crazy isn’t it?
Just like a woman,
who instead of staying in bed an extra day or so,
she responds in gratitude and serves others.

That is why she is called by church historians,
the first deacon of the church.

The first Deacon.
Known not by her own name,
certainly not.
She is Simon’s “mother in law the first deacon.”

I know First Congregational
doesn’t have a bevy of deacons like some churches.
At least we don’t call these first responders
or servers deacons.

We call them The Care of Parish Commission.
And Simon’s mother in law,
like our head of care of parish,
she pops out of bed
and immediately organizes a committee.

    She hands out a signup sheet
to gather casseroles for dinner.
She separates the food for omnivores,
carnivores, vegetarians, vegans,
dividing the gluten free from the rest,
placing the dishes with nuts and the dishes without
at far ends of the serving table.

All the while, Simon’s mother in Law,
just healed by Jesus, most likely turned
from serving food to
handing out get well cards to be signed
for others who are not well
as she moves to and fro
greeting guests and tending
to the disciples who are more interested
in having Jesus known as a side show healer,
than serving anyone a plate of food.
Now feminist cries to the contrary,
Simon’s mother in law is an excellent example
of how one might feel if healed by Jesus.

    One might feel gratitude.
One might feel like helping others.
One might even feel enormous compassion
for others in a similar circumstance.

At least that is so when it comes to
the life of Leland and Jane,
parents of a young man who died of a fever
in the year 1884.
Parents who made a difference in other lives
because their boy, who died of typhoid fever,
had a dream.

    He was a talented boy whose dreams
were cut short and his parents?
They wanted his dream to come true
for other people’s children.

    They wanted their devastating experience
to have meaning, more than their personal catastrophe,
the worst thing that can happen to any parents.
They wanted their son's death to have meaning beyond their own selves serving a greater purpose... and this is how their story is told.

In the spring of 1885, a humble-looking couple from California showed up in the office of Dr. Charles W. Eliot the present of Harvard University.

At first Dr. Eliot refused to see the couple. Refused that is until his secretary told him that Leland had recently been elected to the U.S. Senate from the state of California.

“Oh, California,” thought Dr. Eliot. Not a very important state but never the less the man was a senator and that could not be readily ignored.

The couple walked into Dr. Eliot’s office and shook his hand. They were humbly dressed, she is a cloth coat, he with a hat and umbrella.

“Just call us Leland and Jane,” the woman invited as they took their seats across from the expansive mahogany desk of the Harvard University president.

Without much fan fare, Leland and Jane told Dr. Eliot about their boy, their only child, who had died of Typhoid Fever on a trip to Italy. Their boy, 15 year old Leland Junior, had long held dreams of attending Harvard University.

The grieving parents wanted to build a memorial to their son at the university. “We can’t do anything for our child anymore,” Leland explained, “but we can do something for other people’s children who want a good education.”

“What did you have in mind?” Dr. Eliot asked skeptically. Leland responded, “How about a new building?
How about a building which supports a coeducational, non-denominational program which would create cultured and useful citizens?"

Dr. Eliot paused taking in a deep breath staring at the unworldly and humble couple. He hemmed and hawed a bit as important men do, before dismissing them out of hand. He replied, “Well, it costs a great deal of money to build what you are asking for. You may want to consider endowing a chair in honor of your son instead. I suggest that you go and talk to our academic dean,” he finished, standing indicating the interview was over.

As Dr. Eliot escorted the couple out the door, Jane asked, “How much would it cost to duplicate this entire university in another part of the United States including an endowment for young men and women who may not have the money for tuition?”

Eliot was astounded by the question. After a moment, he said, “I suppose it would take around $5 million. Dollars,” he added a bit sarcastically.

Leland looked at his wife Jane and said, “Well, Jane, we could manage that, couldn't we? Before Dr. Eliot could recover, the couple was gone.

It was only a year later when Dr. Elliot read in the Boston newspaper that a couple in California had begun plans to start a new university in honor of their son. Intrigued by their familiar names Dr. Eliot swallowed very hard as he continued to read.

It seemed that Leland and Jane Stanford had donated their entire estate and $20 million. Dollars. They had donated the money to endow The Leland Stanford Junior University,
now known simply as, “Stanford University.”

This is a story about ordinary looking people who embodied an extraordinary ideal of service, even when their son was not healed.

Jesus did not stop by with a miracle for the Leland family and yet, their understanding of making meaning of life included offering service for others.

What inspires this impulse in people? Why is it in some and not others?

We too know those who serve beyond what is expected. We know the seemingly ordinary people who come and go serving others when and where ever they can in sickness AND in health.

Isn’t that the bigger healing in our scripture today? Not so much the disappearance of the fever in Simon’s mother in law, but more her ordinary willingness to serve others in gratitude for her own life, in sickness and in health.

Wasn’t that the better healing for the Standfords after their son’s death? Though he was not saved they were able to transform their misfortune into service for others.

Jesus came to remind us that transformation is God’s way.

Though many of us question the validity of the Jesus miracle stories, I don’t think we need question the validity of God’s call to serve others.

I think we can see, unlike the disciples, past the miracle fan fare and fireworks to Jesus’ message beneath.
Simon’s mother in law’s recovery and response encourages us to find ways to serve in our most vulnerable places after we have been made well.

Jane and Leland Stanford show encourage us to find ways to serve even when their child died.

Jesus teach us that serving others is a part of life’s transformational renewal which happens both in sickness and in health and that, dear friends, is the real miracle we celebrate today and everyday.

Amen