

I love breakfasts with members of my congregation on Wednesday mornings at the café, on Main Street in our small southern town. One of my particular joys is listening to the long-time parishioners talk about colorful people from the past. In this community, there were, of-course, people like Mason Lee, who slept in a hollow gum log, only claimed one of his twin sons as his own, and believed that his cousins lived in his teeth<sup>1</sup>. Then there was Baron von Poullnitz, who exchanged 21 acres of downtown Manhattan for some swamp-land here in Marlboro County<sup>2</sup>. Hmmm...Not sure that was the very best real estate deal I've ever heard of!

And when characters of more recent memory are discussed on Wednesday mornings, these eccentric personalities are described, by saying about them something like, "Now he was a real piece of work!" "She was a real character!" "He was quite a fisherman!" "She was a died-in-the-wool Republican!" "He was a Yaller Dog Democrat!" These are phrases that describe the key characteristic of a man or woman. Descriptions like these often define the essence of what a man or woman strove to be in this life. I want to come back to that later.

In Mark's Gospel reading this morning, there's a lot of healing going on. This is the passage where Jesus begins the first of three tours through Galilee, during which He casts out numerous demons and performs many miraculous healings (see NIV Study Bible, footnote Mk.1:39, p.1527).

The story of Peter's mother-in-law is actually quite funny. Christ enters the home where she is lying on her sick-bed with a dangerous infection. But Jesus heals her, and of-course she immediately gets up, puts on her kitchen apron, and starts cooking for everyone (see Mk.1:29-31). She is, it would seem, the consummate Jewish mother!

What may get lost in this account of what's going on in Peter's house-hold, is that his mother-in-law is not the only one who is being healed. Peter is being healed in his own way too.

If you follow the account of this episode in Luke, you will see that the healing in Peter's household was one of the things that had to take place before Jesus issued his call to Simon Peter. First, Peter had to witness Jesus perform miraculous signs at Capernaum near Peter's own home town (see Lk.4:31-36). Then Peter needed to host the Lord at his mother-in-law's house, and he needed to witness Jesus perform various miraculous healings as the sun was setting that day (see Lk.4:40-41). And finally, in Luke, Peter and his friends had to pull in their nets with a miraculously huge catch, by fishing exactly where Jesus instructed them to do so (see Lk.5:1-11).

Peter had to go through all these experiences before he was finally ready to fall on his knees, confess his sins, and commit the rest of his life to Jesus (see Lk.5:8). Then, and only then, Peter could finally become a disciple of Christ. But first, Peter's ideas about the way things were in this world required some change. Peter had to go through some healing in his own life, before he could truly become a follower of The Lord.

That's the way the Gospel works in the lives of those who live it. We may see from time to time how God is working through us in the lives of others. From time to time, God allows us to witness the wonders he is performing all around us, if we allow ourselves to be His hands and feet. But what we can almost **never** see is just how He is working **in us**. God is always molding and healing within the lives of those who are truly His. You see, God just isn't finished with you yet.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=18820132>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSvcid=13112&GRid=18813569&>

God wasn't finished with the Shunamite woman of 1<sup>st</sup> Kings Chapter 4, either. This lady of some wealth living along the road to Mt. Carmel had resigned herself to her life. She didn't have any children, and not having children was considered to be a sign of God's disfavor (see *Unger's Commentary*, 14-15, p. 500). In the Jewish society of Elisha's day, if a woman did not conceive and bear children, this was a reproach from God. The belief was that either the woman or someone in her family must have done something to bring about God's disfavor. That's what people thought. But, this woman had evidently come to terms with this lack of a child. She had compromised herself to that life. She had "settled" for good enough, because that was just the way things were. If you listened carefully, the phrase you will have heard repeated over and over in this passage was, "It's all right" (see 2Ki.4:23, 26 \*2). "Oh, it's all right. I'll learn to live with it. That's just the way things are. I'll be all right." And whenever my wife Donna hears me say this, she knows that things are very much NOT all right! But that's the way this world conditions us to be. We are trained to just put up with things and get on with life. We "settle" for what is supposed to be "all right."

But, you see, God doesn't want his children to simply "settle" in this life. God wants his creation to be much better than "all right." He insists that our world be very, very good (see Gen.1:31). God's joy in his children is that these children are gloriously, deliriously fulfilled in all the abundance of His blessing. Our God is not a God who simply wants his children to "settle." So, sure enough, just as Elisha has promised, within a year the Shunamite woman is blessed with a son.

Now, just because God wants his children to be deliriously joyful in this life, that doesn't mean it's all a bed of roses. In this morning's Old Testament Lesson from 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings, the Shunamite woman has a moment of railing at God. Her son is taken from her, and you can hear the anguish in her voice when she asks Elisha, "Why oh why did you raise my hopes up like this?" (see 2Ki.4:28).

And there are times in this life – more than a few times – when I have found myself shouting at God. "Why oh why God? Why oh why God, did you send us to Pittsburgh of all places for Seminary. You know how much we miss home. Why oh why God, did you let us build our beautiful home in South Carolina, just to then make us sell it and move away. You know how much we loved that place! Why oh why God, did you let my dad die just 6 months before I was ordained? You know how much he had desperately wanted to see that day. You know how long he'd waited, how much he'd prayed for that? So why oh why God? Why?"

Yes there are times in this life when we raise our tear-streaked faces and our fists to heaven, railing at God. But, you know what?... That's OK. Because He understands. He knows that his children are going to be angry and hurt by the challenges He sends them. He already knows that there are going to be times when we end up crying out to Him in anger.

But that's OK. Because we're still talking to him, even when we're screaming. And as long as we can do that, as long as we can just keep the conversation going, it has been my experience that God will eventually calm our spirits, and bless our lives with the abundance of His healing. Just like He healed the Shunamite's son. Just like he will heal you and me.

David knew something about railing at God; you can hear it in the Psalm from this morning:

*I pour out my complaint before [the Lord]; I tell my trouble before him... there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me...no one cares for me. <sup>5</sup> I cry to you, O LORD... (see Ps. 142)*

Yes, David knew something about railing to the Lord. But God healed David, forgave him, and gave him a long and wondrously fulfilling life. The Shunimite woman knew something about shouting at God too, and God healed her son. And there are times in this life I feel sure when you will be giving God a piece of your mind as well. But that's OK. At least you're talking to Him. And you will inevitably find that somewhere in the midst of your pain, God's healing will indeed come.

Doubtless Paul knew something about railing at God as well. In this morning's Epistle from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 9, we hear Paul describe how he has had to adapt his life to become all things to all people, so that in so doing, he might win some to the Gospel of Christ (see 1Cor.9:23).

But, tell me something: Do you think that Paul came to this life of service and obedience to the Lord easily or painlessly? Because, let me assure you, he did not. From that initial moment when God knocked the Apostle Paul into the dust of that road to Damascus and to a certain house on Straight Street, after that initial moment of dazzling, blinding light, Paul had some pretty dark places to go through before he could become the instrument that God intended him to be. There was some healing that needed to take place in Paul's life, in order for him to become the grace-filled man who would go onto spread the Gospel of Jesus with such contagious fervor across the entire western world. And this healing which Paul had to go through would be neither fast nor painless.

More than once in his letters, Paul confides to his friends and fellow believers that he feels empty, as though his life is like so much water being poured out upon the parched earth of this world (see 2Tim.4:6, Phil.2:17). Yes, a tremendous amount of molding, and remaking, and healing had to take place for Paul to become the man of grace God intended him to be.

Paul, you see, had become a grace trophy. He had accepted this healing from the hand of God, by God's grace. All through his life, Paul was always in the process of being healed; being healed of his prejudices and preconceptions that he had so feverishly believed as a zealous Jew; being healed of his anger and resentment against those Christians, people he used to see as filthy heretics. Paul was being healed during his entire life, and in this process he was losing his own personal identity, and becoming not Saul of Tarsus but Paul of Christ.

I met a number of grace trophies in 2007 and 2008 during my work in a drug-rehab program near Pittsburgh. At the center you would often encounter these huge men, covered in tattoos, men who bore outward and inward scars of a life spent in the gang culture of the city. And on Sunday mornings these men would congregate at the house-church attached to the rehab center. And these men seemed to be wearing somebody else's face. Because the peaceful, joyful, placid expressions that these men wore had no similarity to the violent lives they had lived. You see, they had accepted the Lordship of Christ in their lives. They had begun the healing process. They had, in fact become grace trophies to the victory of that redemption which is to be found in Jesus. They had begun the healing process, and that process would remain unfinished for the rest of their earthly lives.

. Are you ready for this? Are you ready to let God work through us in the lives of others? Are you ready to be molded and remade into he or she who is of Christ? It requires patience, you know. Because God isn't finished with you yet. But are you ready to be truly healed? Are you ready to be so transformed by Jesus that, decades from now, in some corner of the world, people you haven't even met yet will be sitting around a table reminiscing about your life, and they will say of you, "Yes. Now she was a true believer; he was a real follower of Jesus Christ"?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen. *J. Barnhill, 2-03-12*