



Rembrandt, Christ Healing Peter's Mother-in-Law, 17<sup>th</sup> century

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57481>

Mark 1:29-39

Healing

*Prayer: Living God, help us to hear your Word, and understand, that in understanding, we may believe, and in believing, we may get up and follow you, in our right minds, in renewed health, with joy as we perceive your nearness and your compassion towards us, and towards our neighbors ...*

Columnist David Collins wrote in the New London Day on Wednesday last week, about the collapse of the New London Church, raising important questions about stewardship of church buildings, transparency in church administration, and pointedly questioned whether *Engaging Heaven*, which owns the building, is focused on fundraising or faith. (And he does not mind earning the title of skeptic in the process.) You could use the collapse of the New London church building as a case study in church administration. Questions about inspections, insurance, maintenance, finance. All the boring stuff behind the scenes, until of course it spectacularly grabs national headlines. I have often reminded my people that good church administration is invisible. Which is very different from absent altogether. It is a good case study, in that there is a large group of people digging into those questions now -- we do not know why it collapsed yet but know it did.

Unlike that mostly empty building, many of us were here when we heard the day the New London Church collapsed. We all sort of instinctively checked on each other. This building is not in danger of collapsing, although I understand a new roof is planned. (Which in this light seems like a noble effort.) I also understand following last week's nearly 2-hour annual meeting, how seriously our church leaders take the administration of our many vibrant and diverse ministries; we witnessed that insurance is being paid, money is going where we say it goes, financial and human resources are being attended to. These details have a lot of eyes on them here. That is what good church administration looks like. People meeting, talking things over, edits, corrections, suggestions, questions, conversation. Boring? Maybe, maybe not.

David Collins had questions which sent him digging into the record. He recounted how he, for one, had a hard time believing James B. Levesque, head of the *Engaging Heaven Church*, is who he says he is. Years ago, Levesque told a Christian TV host about healing a man awaiting double amputation, how the man began running around the church after he was healed. It was included in a segment asking people to donate to a number on the screen.

I don't know about that, I wasn't there, I didn't see it. But it is the question in our text today:

What does healing look like? I am not one to stage a spectacle (although I know how to do that), but we do amplify voices, with permission, and for a purpose. Tiago's healing and journey to wellness -- we give thanks for, so many of you give thanks for cancers in remission, narrow escapes from accidents, sobriety, more years of life after recovering from a serious illness... If you listen carefully to what is going on in the joys and concerns shared in our prayers, you hear amazing miracles, as well as heartbreak. An important part of regular worship attendance is to be present to each other, witnessing these passages in our lives. To be present to one another.

There is a financial angle to that, but it is not the focus. Even Jesus' disciples kept a treasury. The money supports ministry. It does not lead it.

Jesus is all about human resources. I need to pause and notice aloud here, that in this passage the person that Jesus is healing is described as "Simon's mother-in-law." Simon is of course, Peter's name before Jesus changes it. And you do not have a mother-in-law in your life unless you are married. Or were married. In the gospels there is no mention of Peter's wife, but Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law.

Paul complains in Corinthians<sup>1</sup>, that the other Apostles have wives, but he does not. So that is in the text. But that is not the focus.

Here is where I would like to draw focus: When Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, she goes right back to her life. She gets up and serves them. (Making them comfortable, preparing food, getting them something to drink.) She re-enters her life. That is the miracle. That she could go back to her life.

Capernaum is on the shore of the lake which is called the "Sea of Galilee" -- it is a large freshwater lake. It says that "at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick...and the whole city was gathered around the door..."<sup>2</sup> Jesus does not allow the demons to speak, because they knew him.

What do you think that means? Again, the demons seem to know Jesus, even better than those who are being introduced to him in his preaching tour of Galilee. It sounds like he does not wish to engage them.

I do not like to speak about evil. At all. Here is why. Evil is not anything at all unless we give it power. It can be like a vortex that gains momentum and strength if you feed in energy. The way that an addiction takes hold of a life, or bad habits can lead downstream to bad outcomes.

Jesus does not engage them, except to remove them from people suffering. The next morning, we find him praying in a deserted place. And when they find him, he is ready to step back into *his* life again.

*When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."<sup>38</sup> 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."<sup>39</sup> And he went throughout all Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:4-5 "Do we not have the right to our food and drink?" he asks, "Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?" (Cephas is another name for Peter) So from Paul's perspective, the other disciples have it much better. He sounds like he would like to be married, too? Implying that the rest of them are.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:32-33

In the gospels Jesus heals many people, and they go on to die later. Their healing is like our own, we get up when we recover from Covid, or whatever it is you had most recently, and you enter your life again. And that is a gift. More years, healthy years, is a gift. It is what we want.

When I completed all my treatments for breast cancer, my doctor told me, “You know, you are going to die -- but not from this!” And I said, “great! I’ll take it. That is good enough for me.”

When I was diagnosed my children were 14, 12, and 9. I had no interest in being part of the tragic story of their mother’s illness and death, I did everything I could to find healing. It turns out there was a lot they could do for me: surgery, chemotherapy, radiation. It took a year. That was over 10 years ago now. They are grownups, and I think quietly to myself, more often than I say aloud, how glad I am to be living these years. Years I might not have had. If they had not caught the cancer with the recommended protocol -- an annual mammogram. I had no risk factors and no symptoms. An ordinary test. Just let me back into my life.

I met plenty of people in treatment who knew that their cancers would ultimately kill them. And I can bear witness honestly, that many of them were deeply, and at times hilariously, joyful -- although they lived with their mortality every day. I met women who had been living more than a decade with maintenance chemotherapy. Not every cancer is cured. None of us live indefinitely. But what we can do now is re-enter our lives with joy. Jesus invites us to remember who we are, to reach for healing, and to step into our lives with faith.

And if you have a demon who is still pestering you, tell them about Jesus. Apparently, they already know Jesus. They listen.

In the end, Peter’s mother-in-law goes back to keeping house. Jesus goes back to preaching in the neighboring towns, because that is what he came to do. And the people re-enter their lives joyfully. We need to be careful not to be distracted by spectacles or shortcuts. We can go back to our ministries, volunteer work, and yes, church administration. It is an invitation today to take a step of faith, to enter your life with joy.

© Reverend Erica Wimber Avena, 2024

Niantic Community Church

170 Pennsylvania Avenue

Niantic, CT 06357

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57481> used with permission