

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI 53098**

“An Inconsequential Life?”

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February 5, 2012

“Immediately [Jesus] left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law lay ill with a fever; and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she began to serve them” (Mark 1:29-31).

Do you ever feel as if your life is inconsequential, as if you’re really not making an impact on the world? At one time, you had high hopes that you would, but you’ve been out there for some time now, doing your thing at work and with your family and friends and on the ball field, and truth be told the ripples are pretty mild, pretty faint. Your name is not on any bridge. You have no jerseys hanging in the Hall of Fame, no personal effects being preserved by the Smithsonian, no signed letters being sold on e-bay. You’ve not been recognized as a leader in your field. Maybe you have children, but they’re grown and gone, or looking forward to being grown and gone. You have some friends, maybe a lot of them according to Facebook. But in reality, there are few whom you would really consider friends and probably fewer still who would think the same of you. (Sorry ‘bout that!) You live in a fair sized town with a struggling downtown and too many houses on the market. You are one of 7 billion people living on this planet as it orbits its way around a fair sized star, which is one of 200 billion stars in the Milky Way, which is just one of at least 50 billion other galaxies. In other words, we’re small. What possible consequence can we have in a world that large? And when we finally die, the world will keep turning. No one is indispensable. Traffic will keep going by the church and may even accelerate to get past the funeral procession. Cashiers at Walmart will still be scanning stuff. And, of all places it’s the cemetery where our names will finally be engraved into granite, in a foolhardy attempt to be remembered, a last ditch effort to leave behind some kind of mark on the world, some kind of enduring evidence that we were here, not unlike leaving your handprint in wet concrete, or scratching your initials onto some bathroom stall. If you think about it, a cemetery is a form of organized and legalized graffiti. “Kilroy was here.”

Kind of a downer of an introduction, right? I’ve often thought it’s a blessing that it’s considered rude to walk out of a sermon. You’d be in the parking lot by now!

I wonder if Simon’s mother-in-law ever felt as if her life was inconsequential. We don’t know much about her, not even her name. This nameless woman lived in Capernaum about 2,000 years ago. She was Simon’s mother-in-law. She got sick. Jesus made her well. And so she began to help with the Sabbath meal. That’s about all we know. There are no recorded words of hers spoken in Scripture, no heroic acts of faith.

The ripples she made on the world were pretty faint. We know her mostly for what was done *for* her, not for what she herself accomplished.

Let's put it into context. It's the Sabbath. Earlier in the day Jesus had been teaching in that synagogue of Capernaum and had a frightening encounter with a man possessed by an unclean spirit. (This was last week's Gospel lesson.) There was screaming. There was convulsing. And there was the strong, authoritative Word of Jesus: "Come out of him!" And when the Lord speaks like that, there's an echo. "And the unclean spirit . . . came out of him."

The synagogue service is now over and so they go to Simon's home in Capernaum to sit down for the main Sabbath meal. Into the lowly, little world of Peter's house comes the Christ, the one whom the devils know and fear.

In the dim of the house there's a woman lying sick in her bed, Peter's mother-in-law. This doesn't seem to be a life-threatening illness. Mark usually lets us know if the person is dying; here he simply says she's sick with a fever. So it doesn't seem serious; more like a common cold . . . the sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching, fever that gives you the chills and makes you want to take a hot bath and then crawl into bed and die . . . but it's really not serious.

Jesus goes into her bedroom to check on her, a friendly gesture we think, but in that day, it is no place for a man to be. And should the Son of God be bothered with this in the first place? It's a fever, for Pete's sake (or for Peter's mother-in-law's sake). It's not leprosy or paralysis or demon-possession. Still, Jesus doesn't hesitate. He assumes the freedom of the house, and goes to her bedside. He stoops, takes her by the hand and gently helps her up out of bed. As he does this, the fever leaves her.

Her reaction is interesting, and gives another clue that it wasn't that serious. She doesn't jump for joy or fall on her knees in praise. She doesn't sing a Te Deum, or shout "Hosanna!" No she goes straight to the kitchen and starts helping out. Peter's mother-in-law does what my mother-in-law always does, as if pulled by some strange gravitational force to the sink of dirty dishes or to the laundry that needs folding. It was the next thing for her to do.

It's a quiet miracle, unassuming, easily forgotten, especially when compared to the rest of the day. It's a quiet miracle sandwiched between the high drama that took place in the synagogue earlier that morning, and the memorable scene that would take place later that day, after sundown marked Sabbath's end, when the whole town showed up at Peter's house, carrying their burdens, their sick babies, their hobbling grandparents, their crippled and lame. But this middle of the day miracle is a quiet miracle. In the morning, he was dealing with a screaming demon, but this is about a runny nose and a sore throat. In the morning the miracle was very public; this was private. In the morning, it was all so dramatic, with loud cries and authoritative commands and convulsions and an astonished crowd; but this one has a domestic simplicity to it. No words, no convulsions, just a gentle hand assisting an old woman out of bed. It's almost boring. Mark did well to notice it. Chances are good she would have felt better in a few days without the miracle, so it really only served as a short cut to health and strength.

I poked around a bit and sure enough, I didn't find any great works of art done on this miracle. Apparently it just didn't measure up in terms of interest level.

So the question is why was it recorded in the first place? Why did Mark bother? It wasn't a big deal . . . unless . . . unless you happen to be Peter's mother-in-law. I suspect she would never be the same, not so much because the fever left her, but because Jesus cared enough to take care of her low-grade fever. From that day on, she knew she was important to Jesus. From that day on, she knew something about the love of God that she probably didn't before, that her life was not inconsequential to him.

She, the old mother-in-law, always feeling like a burden, always feeling like she's in the way, not able to pull her weight; always tired and sometimes cranky; she, with her bothersome sneezing and incessant coughing; she with her chills and hot flashes; she, with her frequent trips to the potty during the night, trips that stir the household; she with her achy knees and knuckles that predict the weather, she whose needs and limitations slow everyone else down, she who needs more service than she can give; she who feels like she's just marking time until death . . . she is important to Jesus, precious even. She doesn't doubt that anymore.

Maybe this miracle is for those who feel their lives are inconsequential. Maybe it's for those who feel we're not having much of a positive impact on the world. The ripples we're leaving behind are pretty faint. Maybe it's for those who feel we receive more care than we're able to give. Maybe it's for those who even hesitate to bring our puny cares before the Holy One of God. After all, what's my stress in the office compared to that marriage falling apart? What's my little fever compared to his pancreatic cancer? What's my sadness compared to her disabling depression? What's a shriveled retirement account compared to abject poverty?

It is good and right that we not complain too much about our small cares and concerns. It could be a lot worse and we're grateful it's not. At the same time, however, this little miracle teaches us even our puny cares matter to him. If a common fever is not too small a thing to concern him, then a lot of things are fair game. If Jesus was willing to step into the darkened sick room of Peter's house, then maybe he's also willing to step into your family room darkened by yet another quarrel, or your kitchen darkened by the cares and worries of the day, or your bedroom darkened by private and quiet tears. If he was willing to tend to the fever of Peter's mother-in-law, then maybe he's willing to tend to your small cares too. Why not ask him to?

Peter's mother-in-law would never again doubt she was important to God. I hope you don't ever doubt that. The one who created and gave names to each of those billions of stars also knows your name. In fact, he cares enough to know how many hairs are on your head, a measure of his love. You may feel insignificant, but you are not, not to him. You may feel your life is inconsequential, but it is not. He still has high expectations of you. You may feel like you will be easily forgotten, but you won't. . . not by him. Isaiah 49: "Can a woman forget her nursing child? Though she may forget, I will never forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (v.15). Not onto some cold, dead granite stone; he has engraved you onto the palms of his hands. Doesn't that make you think of the cross, and the nails, and the forgiveness and the eternal life?

Colds come and go. There are bear markets and bull markets. Lives are born and cars hurry on their way past the funeral processions. People move in and out of our lives with startling fluidity; we forget them, and they us. But he doesn't forget, and his love never vacillates. You are baptized. Regardless of how much or how little is happening in your life, regardless of how big or how small the ripples of your life, it belongs to him.

That's the lesson of this quiet, little miracle. That's why Mark jotted it down. Your little cares are not too little for him, and your small, inconsequential life is not small and inconsequential . . . not to him. Amen.