



**02/07/2021 Lifted Up For Service**  
**Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei**

Saint Peter's Church in midtown Manhattan is a Lutheran congregation with a long history. Local people refer to it as "the jazz church" for its deep connection to the New York City jazz community and for its weekly jazz service. The Covid-19 period has been very debilitating for the artistic community and for Saint Peter's especially.

The congregation has not met for in-person worship since the onset of the pandemic, yet at least 60 members of Saint Peter's Church died from Covid-19 by the end of 2020. That in itself is heartbreaking for any faith community. Then on January 4 of this year, a municipal water main broke outside the church. This flooded the entire plaza where the church is located, and it sent water and mud a few feet deep into the main sanctuary and the lower level of the church. The damage to the building was extensive, including the organ, piano, and archival artifacts which include items once belonging to legendary jazz musicians John Coltrane and Billy Strayhorn. The leadership of the congregation has expressed appreciation for the various ways the broader community has rallied to support Saint Peter's Church during this devastating time. In a very debilitating time, it has been the church to receive the gift of kind people and a lifting hand.

According to the gospel written by Mark, Jesus' first healing miracle is the exorcism of a possessed man in the Capernaum synagogue following his powerful teaching. The teaching so astounds the worshippers that they regard him as one with authority unlike the scribes. However, not all those present at worship are pleased with what he has just said. In fact, the evil spirit, which up until now has enjoyed undisturbed coexistence in the synagogue, vehemently protests Jesus' kingdom words and presence. Jesus does what he senses he needs to do to remain in alignment with the will of God, namely, to bring light to the world and liberation to the afflicted. The possessed man's healing cements the onlookers' opinion about Jesus' teaching with authority, integrity, and conviction. This is exactly what Jesus hopes to achieve: to impress on people the healing and reconciling nature of the realm of God. Many but not all will enjoy the liberating invitation of Jesus and be restored into communion with one another and the whole of God's created world.

What comes next according to Mark is Jesus' second healing miracle, this time in Simon's house but still on the Sabbath day. Jesus has started off on the wrong foot with the purists of the Jewish faith: he heals on a Sabbath (in the Synagogue of all places) and with the healing of Simon's mother-in-law he doubles down on it. The home setting is now the holy ground where the healing happens. Jesus' insistence on healing especially on the Sabbath across the gospels challenges the Pharisees' strict and biased interpretation of the law that prohibits any kind of work on that last day of the week.<sup>1</sup> I wonder why?

That of the Pharisees' is not simply a different interpretation of the Sabbath; he can't just agree to disagree with them or beg to differ; it's not a matter of tolerating a variation to the theme.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-10; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-18.



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Jesus speaks up because the Pharisees' understanding of the meaning of the Sabbath as intended by God is totally off the mark. They mischaracterize the life-giving necessity of the Sabbath for their own benefit. Jesus will soon explain to them that "the Sabbath is for human beings and not human beings for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27-28) The Sabbath was, in fact, created for rest, regeneration, and re-creation. For that reason, God declares it "holy"<sup>2</sup> and throughout the Bible God is disheartened when people do not respect it.<sup>3</sup> Stopping from work and sanctifying the Sabbath is meant for the restoration of body, mind, and soul. The plan for the Sabbath is what to give rest to the slaves, the animals, and the soil and for realignment of one's purpose with the divine values.

On the Sabbath, one relearns and reconnects with God's vision for humanity and all of creation: it has a broad humanistic, humane, and ecological reach which allows one to recover the true meaning of worshipping God in truth and Spirit. This is how we make the Sabbath holy by reconnecting the gift of life with the Giver of life. This is true worship which carries over to all aspects of life, all moments of life, all days of the week, and all hours of the day. The worship of Yahweh on the Sabbath is a ritualized celebration of the rhythm of life in honor of God. What happens on a Sabbath has its natural application to the rest of the week. This is what Jesus has captured in the prayer that he taught to his disciples: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done..." not one day a week but all days of the week. On the Sabbath day we purify our intentions for the rest of the week. A holy life during the week lived for the honor of God makes the Sabbath holy.

The healing of Simon's mother-in-law is particularly explicative of Jesus' message: he lifts her up and she is healed. As soon as she is "lifted up" she gets busy preparing a meal for the unexpected company. Mark uses this same verb to describe Christ's resurrection. The verb is used again and again in the gospel to describe Jesus' healing of individuals. In all those circumstances, the person is restored to their community or to a close relationship. When someone is brought low by unclean spirits, illness, or death itself, Mark says Jesus raises them again to fulfill their valued role in the community.

The result of being raised is the wholeness of new life expressed in service: a well rounded and complete enough life finds new meaning in ready service. Yet, our modern sensitivity should make us cringe at the news that this unnamed woman, whose life was just in jeopardy, immediately begins to serve the men. Shouldn't they tend to her? By our standards, a narrow-minded and patriarchal view of gender roles is at play in this story. The expected role of this woman is to serve others in this home, namely the men who have just arrived. And she does.

There are a couple of Greek words we may want to be aware of, they both are translated as meaning "to serve" in English. One is *douleuo*; its root is *doulos*, a noun meaning "slave." One

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:8-11

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 20:12-13; Jeremiah 17:27.



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who serves in the sense of *douleuo* serves as a slave serves. Jesus frequently uses this as a metaphor for the Christian life.<sup>4</sup>

What is used in this passage is the second Greek word for “to serve,” *diakoneo*. As a noun, the word is *diakonos* which gives us the word “deacon.” The verb means “to minister.” This is not the servile submission of a slave. When Mark, or any of the gospel writers, uses this term, something very different is intended: this is the helping hand offered willingly.<sup>5</sup> The first word, *douleuo*, indicates “servile submission.” The second word, *diakoneo*, refers to “chosen servitude” or “ministerial service.”

Cuban theologian Ofelia Ortega observes, “This woman gets up and turns the Sabbath into a paschal day of service to others. Jesus does not command her. She is the one that assumes the initiative and awaits the consequences, discovering the value of mutual service above the sacredness of the Sabbath.”<sup>6</sup>

We learn from and are called to emulate the ministry of an unnamed and unassuming woman. Many scholars have called her “the first deacon of the church,” who rose restored from her sickbed, made well and whole by the Son of God, and offered herself in service to others. Meaningful service is that which finds its origin in personal healing and not in wanting to “fix” a deficit. Renewed life finds joy in serving: when we serve out of a place of gratitude we receive as much as we give and actually more: we find meaning in being *for* others.

In a recent interview with NPR, documentary director Ken Burns observed that in the past the United States suffered from three very distinct evils: slavery and the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the WWII. The U.S. is presently suffering from three viruses: Covid-19, white supremacy and misinformation.<sup>7</sup> As we look around the country, we can see clearly how these three viruses collude with one another, creating chaos, robbing our neighbors, friends and family members of their health, livelihoods and futures.<sup>8</sup> There seem to be much to be done in terms of exorcising daemons and lifting the sick and impoverished out of debilitating beds.

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<sup>4</sup> Mt 10:24; Mk 9:35; Lk 16:13

<sup>5</sup> Mk 1:13; 10:45; 15:40-41

<sup>6</sup> Feasting on the Word Year B, Vol. 1

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/19/958189841/ken-burns-says-u-s-has-3-viruses-covid-19-white-supremacy-and-misinformation>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.newsbreak.com/florida/kissimmee/news/2153167112778/>; not an isolated incident. Nationally, Black children are about two times more likely to be arrested in school than white children, and in some states like Maryland, the number jumps to three times more likely. This is not because Black children misbehave more but because they are punished more often and more harshly than their white peers. See also related articles: <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/black-children-are-more-likely-to-be-disciplined-than-white-kids-for-the-same-behavior-2019-10-16> and



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The task at hand seems too onerous to be lifted at once and by just one person. But we as individuals retain not only the responsibility of doing our part but also the power to bring about change and we know that if we expect change in others, we better work on ourselves. We can start with modeling the behavior we expect of others. We can choose to remain connected instead of distancing and cutting off from those with whom we disagree and persevere in the difficult conversations even when we feel uncomfortable. We can revisit our values system and make sure we are acting out of our faith foundation rather than out of fear, compulsion, or personal indulgence and pettiness. We can learn to become hospitable enough to be inclusive of all people; bold enough to advocate on behalf of those who are unjustly threatened and feel alone in their plight. We can intervene and to make sure every idea is heard and not just the loudest ones.

You may have the power that comes with knowledge or expertise. Do you share it with others? Do you use it to mentor and coach others, not just to win arguments?

You may have an extensive and powerful network. Do you use that power to make a seat at the table for others, to find opportunities for them, and help lifting them up out of their debilitating bed?

By the grace of God, we are the ones Jesus has come close to and has freed us of our debilitating illnesses. His hand has raised us to new life, may we rejoice and welcome the opportunities to serve. Amen.