

***New Life in Christ Through Servant Leadership:
Healing Simon's Mother-in-Law and "Lifting Up" Florence Li Tim-Oi***

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

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Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park

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After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. (Mark 1:29-31)

I don't know about you, but I would really love to know more about Simon's mother-in-law. The story of her healing is found in all three of the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but we know so very little about her. We don't even know her name. But we know a little bit, and maybe that little bit tells a big story. More about that later. Even though it's a small section of scripture, just three verses, I love this passage and any others that center women in the biblical narrative. Women's voices are all too often left out of written history, including sacred stories. There are many strong female characters in the Bible, but because of the historical context in which the scriptures were written, men's voices dominate most of the stories. It is important for the Church to highlight the voices of women in scripture and to tell the story of female saints and church leaders.

That's part of why I'm so excited about the confluence of two commemorations this year, celebrating women's leadership in the Episcopal Church and our wider Anglican Communion. In the Episcopal Church, this summer will mark the 50th anniversary of the ordination of the first female priests in the Episcopal Church. A large group from Trinity recently attended the screening of a new documentary about these women, called the Philadelphia Eleven. The Philadelphia Eleven felt called to the ordained ministry of the priesthood, but the church was moving too slowly. So, after recruiting three retired bishops to the cause, they presented themselves for ordination before the Episcopal Church authorized women to become priests. This action divided many, but it succeeded in accelerating the movement, with women's ordination to the priesthood officially approved two years later. We will hear more about the story of the Philadelphia Eleven as we approach the 50th anniversary in July.

The other commemoration is that of Florence Li Tim-Oi, the first woman ordained to the priesthood in the entire worldwide Anglican Communion, of which the Episcopal Church is part. The 80th anniversary of her ordination was a week and a half ago. The day was January 25, 1944, far before the mainline Christian denominations were ordaining women as priests and pastors. Her story is remarkable, and I want to share some of it with you today.

Li Tim-Oi was born in Hong Kong in 1907 and felt a call to ministry early in life. She studied theology, and as a lay church worker, she ministered to refugees from the war between China and Japan. She was eventually ordained as a deacon, a role open to women at the time in some parts of the Anglican Communion, and she was put in charge of a congregation in Macau, which was occupied by Japanese forces. The ministry of a deacon is a vital one and not in any way secondary to that of a priest, but the two roles are different. Because of the war and the occupation by enemy forces, it was too dangerous for priests to Macau. Because of this, the congregation had no access to Holy Communion. Li Tim-Oi's bishop had reservations about a woman serving as a priest, but recognizing Li Tim-Oi's gifts and the need of the people, he ordained her to the priesthood. He explained to the Archbishop of Canterbury¹:

"I'm not an advocate for the ordination of women. I am, however, determined that no prejudices should prevent the congregations committed to my care having the sacraments of the Church." After the war, faced with opposition to her continued ministry as a priest from the institutional church, Li Tim-Oi set aside her license to officiate as a priest, although nothing could revoke her ordination. She continued to minister in China for the next few decades, even in the face of persecution by the anti-religious Communist regime. Perhaps Li Tim-Oi's most significant ministry was opening a large maternity home to care for women in childbirth and to ensure that newborn girls would survive in a culture whose patriarchy condemned many to infanticide. In her 70's, after surviving years of forced labor in re-education camps, she immigrated to Canada, where her ordination as a priest was recognized. After decades of hardship, resistance from the church, and persecution by an authoritarian regime, Li Tim-Oi was able to spend the remainder of her life exercising the ministry to which she had been called.

Now, back to our gospel reading today, I promised that we would hear more about Simon's mother-in-law. Let's review the text again:

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<https://houseofdeputies.org/2021/02/28/choose-hope-a-sermon-preached-on-the-feast-of-florence-li-tim-oi/>

After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Anything surprising here? How about this: after Jesus heals the mother-in-law of Simon, also called Peter, the family matriarch begins serving the group of disciples as soon as her fever leaves her. We don't know the role in which she served them, but given the importance of hospitality in this time and place, we could assume that since guests have come into her home, she is preparing them something to eat. We could easily read this as cultural patriarchy, found even in scripture. But I think there's something deeper going on here. Let's look at the words themselves. When the evangelist says Jesus lifted her up, the same word for lifted is used as the one translated as "raised" in the story of the Resurrection. And when we are told that she served them, it's the same word used to refer to the angels attending Jesus in the desert. It's also the same word Jesus used when he said, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." This word is also often translated as minister, as in she ministered. So, this is not a story about a woman's place being in the kitchen and waiting on the table. Instead, it's one of a woman empowered for ministry. Simon Peter's mother-in-law, like all of us who follow Jesus, is a minister of the gospel. She leads by serving. And in fact, this Greek word I've been talking about is *diēkonei*. Does that sound familiar? It's the same word that gives us the term deacon. It could even be said that St. Peter's mother-in-law is the first deacon of the church.

So, rather than a minor healing story of an overworked and underappreciated matriarch being cured of a fever so she could get back to work in the home, this is actually a really interesting story that could be described as an ordination, a lifting up for ministry. Was the first deacon Stephen, as the church remembers, or was it Simon Peter's mother-in-law? Perhaps even more significantly, this could be seen as the first resurrection narrative in Mark's gospel, and one that foreshadows Jesus' own life of service and sacrifice. While the authors of scripture do often bring gendered assumptions into the text, they also lift up women as examples in ways that would have been countercultural in their context. Jesus broke cultural norms to engage in serious conversations with women and to give them leadership roles in his movement. St. Paul later spoke of women as apostles and coworkers in the

gospel, and early Christian martyrs included women who refused to follow their fathers' commands to marry.

The healing of Peter's mother in law is recounted in just three verses, but there is a big story here. As she received healing, she also experienced a call to ministry and leadership. When Jesus lifted her up, she experienced the new, resurrected life of the Kingdom of God. As she served the community around her, she articulated the message of Christ's gospel of loving one another through acts of service.

Florence Li Tim-Oi did the same. On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of her ordination to the priesthood, about a decade after she had passed away, she was honored in a service in the United Kingdom, where only ten years earlier the first women had been ordained in the Church of England for the first time. The preacher at the anniversary service was the son of Li Tim-Oi's bishop back in Hong Kong and Macau sixty years earlier. His son said of Li Tim-Oi's heroic life of servant leadership, "She showed us how the Christ she talked about is living now."

Here at Trinity Church, we strive to show how the Christ we talk about is living now. We do this by sharing God's unconditional love as best as we can, here in this congregation and in our wider community. We do this primarily through service. Like Simon Peter's mother-in-law, like Florence Li Tim-Oi, and like countless leaders and ministers of the gospel: women, men, people of all genders, races, orientations, abilities, and backgrounds. At God's table, all are welcome, all are lifted up to new life, and all are called to serve.

Amen.