

## Delivered For... (Mk 1:29-39)

The movie, “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” featuring Tom Hanks as Mr. Rogers, told the story of the relationship that developed between Mr. Rogers and a hard-bitten, cynical journalist who had been assigned to do a profile of Mr. Rogers for *The Atlantic*. This journalist had a talent for exposing the “behind the scenes” picture of the famous. A scene in the movie where the journalist tells his wife that he’s been assigned to profile Mr. Rogers, has her saying to him, “please don’t ruin my childhood.” She wants to continue believing in the person she grew up watching. He only wants to discover if Mr. Rogers is for real. Happily, for her sake, and for ours as well, the journalist learns that Fred Rogers is Mr. Rogers on and off screen—he’s the real deal and this had quite an impact on the journalist’s life going forward.

There’s a bit of this happening in the passage of Mark that David read for us moments ago. Jesus had left the synagogue where the style and content of his teaching had amazed the congregation, and he’d also cast out a demon from a man who had challenged him while he taught. We considered this in our last time together. But now Jesus was out of the public eye, entering the home of Peter and Andrew along with James and John, where, he learns, that Peter’s MIL is bed-ridden with a fever. It’s evidently serious because Jesus is informed of this right away—immediately—Mark’s key word. What happens next is every bit as instructive as anything he taught earlier that day. And it taught without a single word spoken. One perhaps couldn’t speak, and the other didn’t need to. The heart of the passage is captured in a single verse, verse 31: Jesus went to her, took her hand, and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

In the original language of the text there are four verbs—single words—that carry the story: came near, took hold, raised, and the last word, to serve. It’s said that actions speak louder than words, and this moment portrays that elegantly. Action reveals conviction or motive, and these four capture the dynamic of the kingdom and the goodness of God wrapped up in what Jesus announced and embodied. As we discovered last time, the goal of the kingdom is to displace evil and to heal whatever assaults the well-being of humankind. The impulse of the kingdom alive in Jesus drew him near to the sick woman—that was unconventional in his day. People kept their distance from the afflicted. He took her hand—again, unconventional for in their understanding touching a diseased person would render them unclean, but the goodness of God resident in Jesus overwhelmed uncleanness—his state became hers. And then he raised her—the NIV translates this as he helped her up, but the word Mark used is the same one used of Jesus’ resurrection—she was revitalized, new life sprang up in her. This is a loaded term—there is more going on than meets the eye—there is more happening in this moment than can be explained in a single word. What’s unleashed here? What dynamics are at work? Something has transpired—some hidden dimension of power is infusing this moment. Jesus is undoubtedly aware of this—remember the later account of the woman who secretly touches the hem of Jesus’ garment in the belief that she will be healed—and Jesus was aware of what happened. Mark 5:30 records that Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. In this moment with Peter’s MIL, Jesus, raising her up, knows that power is being conveyed—she knows it too for the evidence is clear as the fever leaves her. Let this thought linger—we’ll return to it shortly. For the moment now the emphasis in this account shifts from what she’s delivered from to what she’s delivered for—the touch of Jesus empowers her to serve—the word in the original language is the same one from which we get our word *deacon*. Peter’s MIL becomes the original *deacon* empowered to serve in the new life of the kingdom.

Jesus’ actions, which likely all happened in quick succession, reveal his inner life aligned with the heart of God. First, love—desiring the well-being of another and working towards this end. Second, mercy—pity or compassion for the person in need. And lastly, kindness—doing what is beneficial, what is needed. This is the God whom Jesus reveals. And where is that kind of God found? Anywhere there is need—in this case the back bedroom. What do we gain from this kind of God? Healing—also the word for rescue, restoration, dignity, and empowered purpose.

As we've noted before, the physical demonstrations of Jesus' power are typically representations of his power in the spiritual realm. And this brief account conveys what happens to anyone who responds to the offer of life Jesus makes. Prior to the touch of grace on our life, we're all of us spiritually febrile, incapacitated in spirit, laid low, so encumbered by the weight of sin that we cannot get up on our own. God's grace finds us in that place and draws near, God's love reaches out and takes hold of us in that state, essentially lifeless within, unlovely at enmity with God, but in that touch, God's power changes us, God's life is infused into ours, we are made alive, renewed, revitalized. And as we are raised up in this new life, we are empowered to serve immediately, as full partners with God in the work of reclaiming creation gaining sight, agency, and purpose. We live in a new dimension perfectly captured by a chorus we occasionally sing: This is the air I breathe, your holy presence living in me. Embraced within that holy presence we are indeed a new creation, alive in a realm that never ends. As you live in that reality, you are a wonder of God's creation—you embody the life of God that seeks expression towards God's purpose for life.

Meaning, then, that we're to learn from Jesus how to live and serve in this life we've received. Consider again the verbs at the heart of this story, but now from the perspective of Jesus in the story. Where is Jesus at work in the world today? Wherever you are in the world is where Jesus is at work. Sometimes Jesus will be at work through us in the public eye, but most of the time it will be apart from huge public moments and very likely in private settings at a point of need. And it won't necessarily be at scheduled hours, but whenever the need is disclosed—we're not on the clock, this is lived life whenever and wherever it occurs. So attending to this, we draw near to the one in need—honestly this sometimes requires us to overcome hesitations or the natural impulse to avoid pain in ourselves or others. We come near, and we take hold—perhaps that will be literal in some cases, but generally speaking it means making a commitment to that moment and to that person. It conveys a sense of concern, of compassion—I am here with you in this moment that seems hopeless, a moment you don't think can change, a moment in which you feel helpless.

As you take hold—and that hold strengthens, you raise that person up. Retrieve the thought that we left to linger not too long ago, because here is where we want to unpack it. We don't know all of what was transpiring in that moment when Jesus raised up Peter's MIL. We admitted that there was more happening than what we could see. But clearly something was being conveyed that made a difference. What I want to suggest is that the act of raising up that you and I do as we take hold will involve more than we can likely comprehend, and it will likely involve actions on our part we might not categorize as resurrection, but we can't know what's happening within anyone else as we commit to their well-being. Raising up can certainly involve what we say in that moment, what we suggest, what we offer, or what we do on another's behalf. It may transpire as rapidly in our experience as it did with Jesus, but it may also play out over time. The power of God to change life isn't limited to a particular formula or one guaranteed means of effecting change. As you pay attention to the direction of God's Spirit in the moment, what you do then or later, what you say then or repeat or build upon later all work together to infuse grace into that life, into that person. You may not have something brilliant to say, or think you have anything tangible to offer, but you don't know how what you have said is taking hold in that hopeless moment. You may not see a tangible difference in that critical moment, but that doesn't mean something vital hasn't happened. As you trust God in the moment for how you take hold, trust God for the outcome in the raising up.

How do we become these kinds of people? Again, we learn from Jesus. After a full day and evening of ministry, he got up early, left the house, found a place of solitude, and prayed. Jesus made time to be alone with God. He needed the time for his own well-being, his own refreshment and renewal to be sure. More importantly, what he did in private, on his own, away from the crowd, prepared him for whatever was to come. Because he invested time in his own spiritual well-being, Jesus was prepared to respond to life as it happened in the confidence of God's presence alive in him. You don't know when you'll encounter the moment of need that needs you in that moment. But if we're learning from Jesus how to be alive in his kingdom, we'll discover that time alone, with God in prayer will shape us, will prepare us to

respond in the grace that is ours when that moment emerges. As this takes hold in us, we will be who we were made to be—authentic, genuine expressions of God’s goodness delighting not only in what we’ve been delivered from, but also in what we’ve been delivered for. AMEN