



Sunday, February 7, 2021

## Healed to Serve

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*Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39*

One of my favorite Pittsburgh people of the past is a short man with a big name. His name is John George Alexander Leishman. You may have heard of him, but I doubt it.

He lived not far from here, where Murray Hill Avenue meets Woodland Road, in a house not unlike the Spencer House next door to our church. Long gone now, he bought it from his friend, Benjamin Thaw.

John began his life as an orphan. His father died the year he was born, drowned in the Allegheny River.

John was a personable and enterprising young man. His first job was running messages for one of Pittsburgh's leading physicians, Dr. Rankin. Then he obtained work as a "mud clerk," which is just about as glamorous as it sounds. He lived 24/7 in a makeshift lean-to on the Mon Wharf, and was on hand to buy and sell raw materials, as they were unloaded from the riverboats. He became a steel broker, in a partnership called Leishman and Snyder (with a man named William Penn Snyder, whose descendant and namesake is an influential Pittsburgher today).

John caught the eye of someone in the steel business. Well, not just any someone — **the** someone: Andrew Carnegie. And one fine day, Mr. Carnegie met up with John and said, "How's about coming to work for me?" John accepted, and that led to his eventually becoming vice president, and then president, of Carnegie Steel.

It sounds like a Horatio Alger rags-to-riches story, and it is.

As vice president, John was present with the then-president of the company, Henry Clay Frick, the day that Alexander Berkman entered his office and attempted to assassinate Frick — and would have succeeded, had John not wrestled Berkman to the ground, thus saving Frick's life.

(Yes, I know you are wondering why you have not heard of Mr. John George Alexander Leishman before. His story would make a great movie.)

And that is not all. After serving as the president of Carnegie Steel, John's friend Philander Knox suggested to **his** lifelong friend, President William McKinley, that John would be an ideal person to serve as a U.S. ambassador — which he did, in succession, to Switzerland, the Ottoman Empire, Italy, and Germany.

Why am I telling you this? Because something happened when he was serving in Constantinople that is a kind of window to what it means to serve. You may not think so immediately, but bear with me on this.

At that time, the U.S. did not own any property abroad — no embassy buildings, no ambassador's residences, no legations, no consulates. Wherever U.S. ambassadors served, they rented their own digs — until John Leishman.

He felt that the U.S. would be better served if they had their own property, to do with as they wished, and he tried to convince his friends in Congress that was a good idea. They did not see the need. They dug in their heels. They did not want to spend the dollars it would take.

Now, among John's many talents, he was a keen card player. And he had a kind of standing game with some of the Western Pennsylvania fellows who served in Washington, D.C. So he proposed — and they agreed — that if he beat them at cards, they would pass the legislation for the U.S.A. to buy the Palazzo Corpi in Constantinople. That is what happened, and it became the first of many, many properties overseas that are official U.S. territory.

Question: What does this have to do with being a Christian, and receiving from Christ and giving in response? Perhaps everything. Here is how.

**One:** At the outset of our Scripture lesson, we have Simon Peter's mother-in-law. She was desperately ill. That is how Jesus and His disciples found her. But that is not how they left her. Jesus responded to her need in a new way, with His ability and power — we still call it miraculous, because we do not really know how He was able to heal people. We only know that He did. He saw that "Mother Mrs. Simon Peter" would be much better situated in life if she were made whole and well. And so there was a transformational moment when she was changed from ill to whole.

It was like winning at cards something as valuable as a palace on the Bosphorus, for a greater purpose than her own. To her, it was even more than that.

When she was healed, what did she do? Did she stay in her bed moaning and wailing and resting up? Did she faintly ask people to bring her something to drink or something to eat? Did she get on the phone and tell her friends about how ill she had been and what a close call it was? All of those would have been the expected things.

But she did not do the expected thing. She did the unexpected thing. She found ways to use her newfound strength and vigor for others. She had gained a foothold in a new land — the land of the Kingdom of God — from which she could do what she was able to do, to serve others. She did not have such a territory before. You could say that where she had been before was not her own. However, as one who had been transformed by Christ, her life was like an embassy through which others could find their way to the land of promise and peace.

She was sick. She was healed. Then she responded — by serving. We can do likewise.

**Two:** That is really all we have to know; but the Scripture passage goes on. In addition to that one sick person, we have the multitudes of the sick. Jesus healed them. Mark gives us no further information about them. We could assume that they responded like Peter's mother-in-law. They found ways of serving — at least some of them. But the fact that Mark is silent on the matter means that he does not know or care to tell us the rest of their stories.

We get it. We think: Some may have moved forward in life, thankful for that moment when they were made whole, but others may be forgetful of their newfound ability to serve others. So often it happens that way. It would be like losing, rather than winning, what was right there to be received. Because, although their life was made whole, it was not put to good use. It languished. We can picture that they lived the rest of their lives, whether long or short, missing moment after moment to make people and places better than they were. That seems likely to be the case. Surely **none** of us would want to live that way — to get to the end of a day, or the end of our life, and the only thing people could say about us was that we did not make one iota of difference for having lived it.

**Three:** Then, we have what Mark says happened next. We have Jesus, who was probably tired after all that He had done, but sought to speak heart to heart with God at a very early hour — so early, that He was well into His prayers when Peter and the others finally found Him.

And what did they say? "Jesus, we are **so** glad we found You"? No. They said: "Everyone is looking for You!"

How do you hear that sentence? Do you hear it like this?

"Everyone is looking for You! What a sensation You have made! Everyone is bowled over. People are noticing what You are doing. They are spreading the word. Kudos, Lord. They all are looking for You."

Or do you hear it something like this?

"Everyone is looking for You!" As in, "Where have you been? **We** have been looking high and low. So has everyone else. We know You like Your quiet time, Jesus, but, really, there are people in need, who are wondering where You went. There is stuff to do. So, get up. Get a move on, Lord."

Jesus could have taken a moment to teach them. After all, it was a teachable moment. He could have said something like, "Once we have cared for and healed people, we need to spend time with God to say, 'Thank You,' for what God has made possible; or to renew our strength; or to get our priorities straight." All of which is true.

But Jesus does not choose to do that. He does not even mention that they interrupted His quiet time.

No, He responds to them by saying, "Let us go somewhere else — to the nearby villages — so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

When we seek the Lord, we try to draw as near as we can, because we know that wholeness and healing are to be found in Christ. So it is when we draw unto His table. Our act of sharing in this sacrament is a participation in the real and spiritual presence of our Lord. Jesus is not far off or hard to find. He is with us. He brings His elements of wholeness to us. He seeks to share and to serve us.

We draw near to His table, each with our own needs, where Jesus will respond to them, in love and grace. No matter what is happening in our lives at this moment, Jesus knows. Jesus understands. "That is why I have come," He says. Jesus has come to provide what you need.

Can you open your life to the love and joy that is coming your way? As you do, remember you are also opening your life to those around you. For, to let love and joy in, you must also be open to them. Even as Christ cares for you, so, too, Communion is a sacrament in which you are empowered to serve.

Think about what you can do, when this holy meal is ended. Because the meal is just the beginning; from here on in, you have a place from which you can make a lasting difference in the world — a kind of embassy of faithfulness.

You have been healed to serve; saved to share; forgiven to forgive; reborn to rejoice. The service starts where Jesus meets us, and the service goes on and on in Jesus' name. In Christ it is so. Amen.