

The Rev. Jimmy Abbott
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 5, 2012
Mark 1:29-39

Super Service

I have no dog in this fight. New York Giants...New England Patriots. It's really hard for me to care about Super Bowl 46. I have it from a very reliable source that Bill Belichick, that's the head coach for the Patriots, that his ex-wife is an Episcopalian. But that's nothing to hang your hat on. So I guess I have no dog in this fight.

But by the time kickoff gets here this evening, you know where I'll be. Parked on the sofa, watching Super Bowl 46 for the sake of Super Bowl 46.

And I know that I will share this experience with many millions of other men across the country. We will sit down on our sofas with a cold one, a bag of potato chips, and prepare ourselves for what I hope to be a great game.

So that's where the millions of men will be. Where will the women be? Surely many women will be watching the game. But some women will only pop in and out for the commercials, and many more women will skip Madonna's halftime show in favor of Animal Planet's "Puppy Bowl." And I'm sure there are many women out there who will rejoice that this is finally the end of football season! September to February is a long time...

Now, it would be awfully easy for us to characterize our gospel reading this morning as the first century version of the Super Bowl. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue with authority and casting out unclean spirits. His fame is spreading throughout all of Galilee. Immediately after he is done teaching that day, Jesus went with Simon Peter to the home of Peter's mother-in-law. She was in bad shape – sick with a fever. And sick with a fever in a day and age without that wonderful little pill called "Tylenol." Jesus enters the house, takes Peter's mother-in-law by

the hand and lifts her up. Right away the fever leaves, she is healed! And what does she do? She starts serving Jesus and his companions.

If we want to be cynical, this passage seems to present the perfect opportunity. All the guys have just been sitting around all day in the synagogue, chewing the fat with Jesus. Then they come home late, sit around some more, and this newly healed woman serves them cold ones and potato chips.

But for a moment, suspend your cynicism and dig a little deeper into what's going on here. First of all, it's common knowledge that the disciples of Jesus are bone heads. Does Jesus call Peter "Rock" because he's stable, or because he's "dumb as a rock?" At best the disciples are hapless followers of Jesus and at worst, they are traitors and cowards. Really, the gospels aren't very generous to the men that follow Jesus.

Now contrast this with Peter's mother-in-law. She is healed, literally "saved" by Jesus. And as a proper response to the incredible gift she has received, she pours herself out. In a sense, she does to Jesus exactly what Jesus has done for her. Jesus served Peter's mother-in-law by saving her. Peter's mother-in-law serves Jesus in her home.

Later on in Mark's gospel, Jesus speaks frankly to his disciples: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43b-45). See, it is Peter's mother-in-law who is to be honored. Her faceless and nameless life of service ranks as far greater than the disciples in this passage.

On that sick bed, taken with fever, she dies to her old self. Then Jesus, taking her by the hand, raises her to a new life. A life in Christ. She no longer lives, it is Christ that lives in her. And the life of service she lives, she lives in thanksgiving, and in gratitude to Jesus.

Now before I proceed any further, allow me to make a brief editorial note: I am a man. True, I cannot grow a beard; nevertheless, I am a man. But please hear me: I am not holding up the example of this woman because I think women need to serve in the home. Nor is her example of service a kind of protocol for “Christian women.” For in Christ there is neither male nor female. I am elevating Peter’s mother-in-law because she does exactly what we are *all* supposed to do. As Christians, we are all supposed to serve one another. Her example is the guideline, the prototype, not only for women, but rather for all Christians.

In some way or another, Jesus is saving or healing each one of us. Let’s not kid ourselves. We are a fragile and sickly people; beset by sin, disease, heartache, loneliness, death. The Church is not a haven for the righteous, but a hospital for sinners. We come here to be healed, to be saved from what ails us. We come here to be touched by Jesus, and to be raised by Jesus into a new life.

For how else can we explain the mystery of communion? Somehow, in some weird sort of way, I believe that Jesus actually touches us, heals us, raises us when we eat of his body and drink of his blood.

In response, the only proper thing to do is to fall down before Jesus and offer our lives in service to God. Think of this incredible gift, our Lord’s body and blood for our healing and nourishment. What else can we do but serve, and wait upon the Lord?

I would like to think that Jesus will be watching the Super Bowl. As Jesus sits there with a cold one and a bag of potato chips, whatever you do, *do not sit down and join him*. You have

been healed by Jesus, it is now your turn to serve him. If Jesus wants another bag of potato chips, open it up for him. If Jesus needs a refill, don't wait until he asks, go ahead and fill his glass for him. And when it's time for dinner, serve Jesus his chili and buffalo wings first. You can wait.

When you receive a call from God to serve, do not waffle. When you hear of a ministry that you want to join, or a people that you want to serve, do not delay. You have been healed by Jesus Christ himself. It is Christ that lives within you.

After the Super Bowl, either the New York Giants or the New England Patriots are going to lift the Lombardi Trophy. One of those teams will celebrate with "Super Bowl Champions" t-shirts and a champagne shower. The victory tonight is going to go to the team that proves itself to be better than the other.

But not so at the end of our days. Those who win the crown of life will be the servants, those who have lost. Male or female aside, if you wish to become great, become a servant. If you wish to win, then you first must lose. The fever has left you, Jesus has healed you. We are here not to be served, but to serve.