

**Food on the Table
(Mark 1:29-39)**

Rev. Koyama

Today is both Ascension Sunday and Mother's Day. The first reading oriented us to the Ascension, which is the moment after his resurrected appearances, when he is taken up into heaven. That sets the stage for Pentecost, next Sunday, when he will descend from the heavens in the form of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel reading is a little different. I decided to replace the assigned reading with one that would celebrate mothers, and to do it starting with the disciple Simon Peter's mother and then by remembering a mother who was taken up into heaven to be with Jesus several decades ago, but who continues to be present with her family as an expression of Jesus's ongoing presence with them.

Simon's Mother

But let's begin near the beginning of Mark's Gospel with Simon's mother. Simon's mother, who is unnamed is lying in bed with a fever. Jesus lifts her up and she begins right away to serve. It is the shortest possible description as is often true in Mark's Gospel, that actually suggests a lot about her. But what it suggests can be very different things to different people.

What I find most noteworthy about this description is Simon's mother's response. She goes straight to work. There is no indication of any gap between Jesus's healing touch and her setting about her work. No intervening pause to reflect or to marshal her strength. She just goes straight from being sick to being at work.

And the work she takes up, mirrors the work that Jesus takes up in the following paragraph; where he goes out to meet the needs of the onslaught of people who come to the door in search of healing. But in Simon's mother's case, the people she goes to work taking care of are Jesus and four of his disciples who are staying in her house.

Reactions: Gender and Vocation

It strikes me that this brief story would draw different reactions from people who are in different places in today's culture wars.

For someone who looks at the world through a progressive lens, this story might suggest a kind of subtle gender stereotyping. After all, the consequence of her healing is that she jumps up and basically waits on Jesus and the male disciples, presumably preparing a meal for "the boys," so they can go back out there and do their work.

So the question would be, “Why can’t “the boys” take care of themselves, instead of waiting for this woman who has just been desperately ill (and could probably use a rest) to do it all for them?” The story also seems to reinforce the idea that the house is her workplace and outside the door is the work place for the guys

Through a more traditional lens, these details might be seen very differently. Simon’s mother might trigger the fondest memories of the fresh smell of Mom’s cookies baking in the oven and the tall cold glasses of Kool-aid mom had waiting for all the kids when they ran into the house after running around outside. It might stir up memories of how nothing stopped Mom from being the reliable foundation for the life of her children.

I guess that the word “Mother” can mean a lot of things, depending on how a person sees it. My own reaction is a mix. My personal feeling about family roles is that whoever is the best cook and wants it most, should be the cook in a household. And if it is Dad, then more power to him. I don’t think that gender should be the deciding factor for who has what role whether it is inside or outside of the house.

Obasan

And so, with that said, I’d like to introduce you a woman who brought tremendous dignity to her role as a homemaker in a way that brought her

deep admiration and respect and shaped each of the generations of her family that followed. That woman was my dad's mother.

We called her "Obasan", which means "grandmother" in Japanese. Her real name was Tama Koyama. She grew up during the early twentieth century in Japan in the family of a wealthy merchant. As a young woman she loved to go to the Kabuki theater and we still have black and white photos of her, immaculately dressed in kimonos.

During the earthquake and fire that consumed Tokyo in 1923, her husband's business burned to the ground and the family was reduced to near poverty. The business never recovered and dad's father died of pneumonia a few years later, still a fairly young man, leaving Obasan to raise three sons and two daughters.

She went from being a child of privilege to being a penniless widow with five hungry mouths to feed. And somehow, she did what she had to do. She devoted herself to providing for her children in any way she could. All through the ensuing years and through the Second World War and the bombings of Tokyo, she labored on their behalf.

And after the war, because she was part of the small Christian minority, she was able to find a position on the kitchen staff at the Tokyo Theological Seminary, where her youngest son, my father, became a

student. And when he finished his coursework, the Seminary sent him to Princeton New Jersey for graduate study. And there in New Jersey, he met an Iowa farm girl studying sacred music. And that's why I'm here today.

Vocational Excellence

The main reason Obasan comes to my mind is because, as I imagine Simon's mother was, Obasan was the provider of the meals. She came to live with us twice during my youth, each time for about a year.

Her routine was to go out each day and buy fresh ingredients. Then, she would single-handedly prepare dinner for our family. It was always Japanese food and there was always an assortment of dishes that included meat, vegetables, rice, pickles and miso soup. The rice was always perfectly cooked. The miso soup was always just right with a little cloud floating in it. The table was always presentably set.

During dinner, she never sat at the table, but instead sat in a chair between the stove and table. And throughout the meal, whenever a water glass or rice bowl was empty, she would be right there ready to provide a refill. She herself never ate until everyone else had finished eating.

As far as I know she never complained or deviated and I find it almost impossible to imagine her behaving out of character. It was her domain.

And she just smiled and shoo'ed you away, if you offered to help. For me as a young person, it was great. I was spoiled rotten.

Back then, I don't think I was able to understand what made her such a consistent and unwavering example of servanthood. She never spoke a word of English and we communicated with her in a sort of makeshift sign language and with single words.

She was trained in the tea ceremony and flower arranging and paper doll making and I am certain that this cultural background along with her Christian faith and her wartime experiences go a long way to explaining what made her who she was.

One of the great insights of traditional Japanese culture is the idea that no matter what you do for a living, you have dignity if you carry it out with excellence.

For example, there was a time when, if you went into a major department store in Japan, you would find women wearing white gloves, going up and down in the store elevators, pressing the buttons, announcing the floors and behaving in a professional and courteous manner. Every movement of their gloved hands was intentional and stylized.

Obviously from our point of view it seems like a pretty trivial job. We can push the buttons and read the floor maps for ourselves. And you might feel pity for a person who has to go up and down in an elevator all day doing this kind of work. But when a person does something like this as excellently as it can possibly be done, it is no longer trivial at all. In fact it becomes a highly impressive and dignified contribution to the lives of others. And this is true of every occupation. A person's dignity has nothing to do with whether the job he or she holds has a prestigious title or whether the work is inside or outside the house, for that matter. It has everything to do with how that person approaches the job.

I think that a fusion of these traditional understandings and her Christian faith help explain how it is that everything was prepared just right, when we came to Obasan's table each night. It's not hard to see why Dad made it clear to us that she was the most influential and revered person in his life and this his reverence for her had a ripple effect on the whole family.

The Breakdown of Certainty

You would think then that the memory of Obasan would put me on the conservative side of the culture wars that exist in our country today. You would think that I would be calling for the rejection of progressive values and a return to traditional roles and greater conformity and that I would turn to the Bible to advocate for it.

The reality is that the Bible is both traditional and progressive in its outlook on life. But to be honest with you, today I feel homeless when it comes to the partisan camps that would like to have their views championed from the pulpit. I take comfort in the fact that when Jesus heard the arguments going on around him, he said of himself that “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” And I see those words as permission for me to be homeless in this way as well. Maybe it’s a mark of sanity not to find too comfortable a home in any of the schools of thought that are competing for our loyalty today.

A Golden Age?

But there is one further thing I’d like to mention about Obasan’s life, that I think connects her with Simon’s Mother, with Jesus and with most mothers through time.

For those of us who lean toward the traditional and nostalgic side, when we think of our mother’s and motherhood, it is easy to look back as though to a “golden age” of stability. It is easy to believe that there was a time when people had not gone off the deep end as they have today. Where the world was orderly and reasonable in a “Leave it to Beaver”

sort of way. And we are tempted to look at today's world and throw up our hands in disgust and defeat.

But the interesting thing about Obasan's life, is that she lived in anything but a "Golden Age." Much of her life was spent dealing with one disaster after another. In fact her whole neighborhood was flattened by the bombing during World War II. And yet she was able to give the closest thing possible to a golden age to her children and figured out how to provide a heavenly table for her family, in spite of it all. It is beyond my understanding how this could have come to pass apart from God's grace.

And her story mirrors that of Jesus in our Gospel reading, who also lived during a time when, the suffering and need was so great that he everywhere he went he was overwhelmed by crowds clamoring to be healed. He was a pillar of grace in an ocean of misery.

Maybe motherhood at its best has nothing to do with whether or not the days of our youth were really a 'Golden Age.' My guess is that the time in which Mrs Cleaver lived, during the 50's- and 60's was probably, more of an anomaly than the norm in human history. Maybe what some of us see as our golden age was actually a time of uncertainty, struggle and change, not so different from today. And that the only reason we

believe there is such a thing as a “Golden Age”, is because we had a Mother who labored to make it Golden for us.

An Incarnational Understanding

Obasan, was for the Koyama family an example of what we call an “incarnational theology.” It is the belief that God takes up human flesh in every time and place to minister in our midst.

I and the Deacon of the Month stand before you on the first Sunday of every month, as a way to symbolize how God comes to us in the sharing of the bread and wine.

Obasan sat between the stove and the table, modeling Christ’s love by feeding her family at her table. And I sat at the table happily eating as much as I could, in a world where every glass was filled and every dish was in its proper place. And I ate with no real understanding of what she had done for us until much later.

God bless the Mother’s and motherly women in all our lives, who model Christ for their families. You who are here today and who have ascended to live with Christ in heaven and are still present with us in the Spirit. May God bless you as you celebrate your own mothers on this special day.