

# Telephone

## “Let loose.”

### Mark 1:28-31

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#### **Beyond Usefulness**

I’ve mentioned Lena before. She was an old saint of a church who captured the essence of what it means to follow Christ.

When I first saw Lena, she was in the kitchen with a bunch of other women during a church work-bee. They were cleaning the refrigerators and ovens and preparing food for the big potluck. It was hot in the kitchen: but it was obvious Lena had ever been a person who could stand the heat.

I think if you were to ask Lena about Christian service, she’d say hers was kitchen work and taking care of people. She had been a nurse; and when her husband Merle broke his hip in his late-80’s, she was determined it was not going to do him in. After his hospitalization she nursed him at home, coaxing him to not resign to immobility. She drove him to walk and strengthen and recover, vital as ever.

She was one of the most active people I’d know. I’d go to their house on a hot summer afternoon and she’d have to come up from the basement where she was busy over a hot stove canning the beans she’d spent all morning picking in their garden. She was just always active.

So it was hard when her mood changed when Lena aged well into her 90’s. She started telling us that her eyesight was going and she couldn’t do the things she used to do. She’d say, “I don’t understand why the Lord doesn’t take me.”

(I suppose it didn’t help her when we pointed out that she and Merle hadn’t had children yet and, after all, Sarah was 91 when she gave birth to Isaac).

Granted, her gardening and canning had gone by the way-side. She wasn’t doing the nursing or the things in the kitchen she used to do. But to us she was still Lena; her very presence made a difference.

I think that in the end, Lena understood. The things she had done for others were important acts of service making a difference for the love of God. But none of them, on their own, were what gave Lena the right to live or be loved.

Independent of all these things she did: Lena had value.

### **Under the Oaks**

That's the tricky thing about serving. Some people just have to do things. That's what defines them. So they are the first people who volunteer to

- drive the kids to soccer,
- bake a dish for the funeral luncheon,
- sign up to go to a home renovation project,
- clean out a room at the church,
- serve on a PTA committee,
- coach a kids hockey team,
- knit little caps for babies at the hospital,
- fix a neighbor's lawn mower,
- stuff bulletins and newsletters for church,
- serve on one or more of the 159 elected roles we have presently here at church.

These aren't usually the kinds of things you can pay someone. But they need to get done; and some people are the first people to do them because *doing* is what *defines* them.

Bless their hearts. Thank God for them.

This time of year, when churches, schools, scout troops and teams are scrounging for volunteers: we go into a panic when we can't find enough of them. Without them, the team doesn't get to play, the ministry doesn't happen, the program doesn't come off unless some other doer who already has enough if not too much to do steps in.

Then the rest of us can start to relax. And they can start to resent.

So, it's a mixed bag for having people who *have to do*. They need projects and we need them. But they can over-do and become embittered while the rest of us don't do. Or they can lose their capacity to do – as they understood doing...and like Lena, end up feeling worthless.

This story about Jesus has ever-fascinated me. One of the reasons is that it isn't just about Jesus. Even though she's hardly mentioned, the story is also about Simon's mother-in-law.

The writer of Mark says that even though it was the Sabbath when you weren't supposed to work, Jesus was teaching and healing and casting demons out of people in the synagogue. Working, in other words. Then they went to the home of Simon and Andrew.

Right away, Jesus heard about Simon's mother-in-law: that she was in bed with a fever. That's all it says. You don't know if she's come down with a sore throat that day or if she's been afflicted with a case of hepatitis, out of circulation for weeks. All we read is that she was out-of-commission.

And we don't know what she was usually like. Bible commentators I've read haven't even speculated, like it isn't very important to the story. All we know is that she's sick, she's confined to bed, and she couldn't do anything but lie there.

*To Jesus*, thought, she had value *even though she couldn't do anything*. He didn't heal her because she was needed in the kitchen. Nor did he step in because of her relationship to his disciple: like it's "who you know that counts."

Just like in the synagogue and everywhere else: Jesus was motivated by God's love. People are given value not on the basis of what they do but by who they are: God's ever-precious, always important child.

That and that alone is what gives you value. You are God's child.

It wasn't a requirement. It was an opportunity. Simon's mother-in-law responded to her healing. She had been served, so she got up and served the rest. How did the writer of I John put it? "We love because he first loved us."<sup>1</sup>

Because she was able, she did what she was able to do. And when you're able, serving is one of the things you do.

"We renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our...service: another church membership promise that's actually about something you get if you do it.

It's kind of funny how this works. We commit to serving. If we didn't, the church wouldn't work and God's work to make the earth heavenly would not get done.

But we aren't obliged to serve as though our value depends on it.

God gives you the value and purpose first and then wants you to live out who you already are. Both for the big stuff and the comparatively little stuff. And whatever becomes of it: serving turns out to be a riot.

Sometime rake a neighbor's yard when they're out-of-town if you can. Sometime shovel their walk. Make a casserole for a neighbor who's ill or over worked. If someone wants to do that for you: let them. Letting someone be in ministry for you is service, too.

Then sometimes little things add up and build up to become something big. Like Eleanor Josaitis, who had to do something after the Detroit Riot of 1967. Working with Father William Cunningham, they didn't know that their first efforts to do some healing, made without much expertise, would result in the celebrated work of Focus: HOPE.<sup>2</sup> Or like Lynn Cummings, who recognized the beginnings of "white flight" in Pennsauken, New Jersey. She responded by hosting neighbors for coffees; that was something she could do. Out of growing friendships, diverse neighbors learned their steps one step at a time: leading their community to be an intentionally integrated and healthy community.<sup>3</sup> For the good of their community and the world.

Service doesn't mean you have to do something great for it to count or for you to be worth it. You are already of great value, anyway. But if you just put yourself in the path of God, there's no telling where the wind of God's Spirit will carry you or what you've done. No telling.

### **Giving and Receiving**

One day I visited Lena after she started lamenting her advanced age and uselessness. We were sitting in her living room, having a good talk when something occurred to her and she excused herself from the conversation. She picked up her phone, paused, named a member of the church, and said that she heard that they had been ill and went the doctor earlier that day. Without looking up a number she took a moment to search her memory, and then said it out loud as she dialed the phone.

It was a gift to have heard her brief conversation: supportive and compassionate, inspired and encouraging. She ended her call with a short prayer and words of hope and then hung up.

“Lena,” I said, “there’s your ministry. What do you mean you don’t know why God doesn’t take you? Your ministry is awesome!” A precious child of God full of value: she was still stepping in the path of God.

Lena had ventured into a new season of life. Earlier gifts had largely left her; but the new ones she was given were maybe greater still.

It doesn’t matter what you can’t do.

We all can’t do a lot of things.

What matters is who you are and what you can do.

So may you take what you have and let it loose!

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<sup>1</sup> | John 4:19

<sup>2</sup> 1960s-1970s: *Focus: HOPE emerges as advocate for minorities and poor*. History page on the official Focus: HOPE web site [http://www.focushope.edu/page.aspx?content\\_id=124&content\\_type=level2](http://www.focushope.edu/page.aspx?content_id=124&content_type=level2).

<sup>3</sup> *The New Metropolis, Part 2 “The New Neighbors”*. Produced by Andrea Torrice, Torrice Productions. © 2009.