

A big-game hunter went on safari with his wife and mother-in-law. One evening, while still deep in the jungle, the Mrs. awoke to find her mother gone. Rushing to her husband, she insisted on them both trying to find her mother. The hunter picked up his rifle, took a swig of his frostbite medicine, and started off in search of the missing woman. In a clearing not far from the camp, they came upon a chilling sight: the mother-in-law was backed up against a large tree, waving a switch back and forth, and a large male lion stood facing her. The wife cried out, "What are we going to do?"

"Nothing," said the hunter husband. "The lion got himself into this mess, so let him get himself out of it!"

There are hundreds of mother-in-law jokes. I have been told, now that a mother-in-law is residing in the White House, that I need to be more careful with things like mother-in-law jokes. I do promise to try.

I suspect it is just as bad to have a meddling, grouchy father-in-law who lords his will over everyone in the family to the point they all must walk around on eggshells. If you are either a mother-in-law or a father-in-law and that God-given role is causing family disruptions and pain, stop it right now!

Some of us have been blessed with mother's-in-law who are our friends first and the mother of our God-given mate second. I am most grateful to God that Shirley's mother was one of my best supporters and close friend. We still miss her physical presence, but we still feel her prayers.

Mark 1:29-39 tells the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. There are three important lessons in this story for us. They revolve around three individuals or groups of individuals.

The first individual is the person of Jesus. Notice that Jesus does not need an audience to exert his power. This is a private healing. Just as in the synagogue, Jesus speaks one authoritative word and that which is out of place is put back the way it is intended to be. Jesus completely disregards the paraphernalia of the day and does what is most characteristic of him. He came to a sick woman, bent down, took her by the hand and lifted her up. There is no great fanfare, no great shouts, and no outward display that would be called showy. Just two people, one with a need and the other with the power to help. A miracle to Jesus was never a means to increase his prestige and was not done to help an unbeliever come to faith. Healing a sick person was not some disagreeable task for him. He helped because of his great love for each person and because he wanted all people to be whole in body, mind, and spirit. It remains as true today

as ever; Jesus is supremely interested in all who need his help. We need to also point out that Jesus did not heal Peter's mother-in-law in order for her to fix his supper. It was the cultural expectation for the most senior woman of the house to oversee the preparation of the evening meal. Peter's mother-in-law probably met that description and is restored to health in order to take her position of honor in the home.

The second group from whom we may learn something is the disciples. There were folks who, in some instances, had known Jesus only a short time, but even that short time was enough for them to know they could take their troubles to him. Peter's mother-in-law was ill. A simple home was being upset by disease and it was the most natural thing in the world for the disciples to tell Jesus about it.

Paul Tournier, a French medical doctor and devoted Christian writer, told of the greatest discovery he ever made. He visited regularly with an elderly Christian minister who never let him leave without praying with him and for him.

Tournier was moved by the simplicity of the old man's prayers. It seemed, he said, like the continuation of an intimate conversation that the old fellow was always having with the one he called the Christ. Tournier said, "When I got back home from one of my visits I talked it over with my wife, and together we asked God to give us that close relationship with Jesus just like the old pastor had. Since that time he (God in Christ) has been the center of my devotion and my constant traveling companion. He takes pleasure in what I do and concerns himself with it. He is a friend with whom I can discuss everything that happens in my life. He shares my joys and my pain, my hopes and fears. He is there when a patient speaks to me from his heart, listening to him with me and better than I can. When the patient is gone I can talk to him about the problem."

That is the very essence of the Christian life and one of my prayers is that my own personal prayer life can become more and more just a continuation of an intimate conversation with a friend. I also pray more medical doctors will have that personal encounter with this one called the Christ. I pray that they might see the truth of the report some time back in the *British Journal of Medicine* that said, "There is not one cell in the human body that does not come under the sway of the spirit."

The early disciples learned, and so can we, what became a habit of a lifetime, to take all their troubles to Jesus the Christ and ask for his help.

The third person from whom we may learn in this story is Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus came to her, bent down, took her by the hand, and lifted her up. She

did not utter a verbal word of thanks; at least the record does not indicate that she did. But, she does something that showed her gratitude far more than words could convey. She assumed her honored role in the social norms of the day and oversaw the serving of those who had come for the evening meal after the Sabbath. She was giving back what she had received. It is the most basic of all Christian principles, "freely you have received, freely give."

We miss a crucial point here if we see only the evangelical outcome of renewal. It is often the case that the renewed life would lead only to witnessing with words. It is a far more effective statement to use the renewed life for renewed service. We do a grave disservice to the whole of the Good News of God in Christ if we separate evangelism from social justice and Christian outreach. From Peter's mother-in-law we can learn the valuable lesson that healing is meant to be a springboard to greater service.

So, let us be thankful for the great love of Jesus that comes to us, bends down, takes us by the hand, lifts us up, and puts us back on our feet. Let us learn that everything can be taken to Jesus, and like Peter's mother-in-law, help us use the renewal of our lives as opportunities for greater service to all of God's children. Some of you may want to start with your mother-in-law. Amen.