

## **“Demons vs. Deacons”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
February 7, 2021 – Fifth Sunday after Epiphany  
Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

Today is the day of the big competition! That’s right; it’s Puppy Bowl Sunday! Later today, 70 rescue pups will square off in Puppy Bowl 17 as Team Ruff and Team Fluff struggle against each other to win the coveted Lombarky Trophy (and the more coveted prize of getting adopted). Oh, and yes, this is also the day of the Super Bowl, and many of us will be watching the ageless Tom Brady, playing in his 10<sup>th</sup>(!) Super Bowl, as the Tampa Bay Buccaneers take on the Chiefs of Kansas City, Missouri, led by Patrick Mahomes, who for the second year in a row is competing to be the world champion of American football. And in today’s gospel lesson on this Super Sunday, we read of another heavyweight struggle for victory: The demons versus the deacons.

In the gospel reading, we find Jesus coming to the house of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew in Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. The scene immediately follows the one we read about in last Sunday’s gospel lesson, when Jesus healed a person in the local synagogue by casting out of him an unclean spirit. In the original Greek of the gospel, we read that Jesus came to Simon’s home *immediately* (euthus in Greek, translated “as soon as” in our NRSV) after leaving the synagogue. As a side note: We will read many times over the course of this year as we work through the Gospel of Mark the word *immediately*, as it is one of Mark’s favorite words, used in the gospel 40 times, while appearing in the rest of the New Testament only a dozen times. While following the lectionary, we chop up the stories of the gospel into bite-sized chunks, but they were originally meant to be understood as a connected whole, with the action of the gospel happening non-stop,

with one event *immediately* following another. For today's story, this is important to note as the action happens immediately after Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath day. So it was still the Sabbath day, when Jesus healed again, this time the mother-in-law of Simon.

Doing any kind of work on the Sabbath, as we know, was not encouraged in Jesus' day. In fact, it was looked down upon, especially by many of the religious leaders, who considered themselves to be the guardians and enforcers of their religious traditions. And yet Jesus did the work of healing on the Sabbath, first in the synagogue, and now in the house of Simon and Andrew, as he took Simon's mother-in-law by the hand, lifted her up, and healed her of a fever. And she, in turn, worked on the Sabbath, responding to the gift of healing through service. The original text says that after the fever left her, she diēkonei, which, to mash up this Greek with our English, means that she "deaconed" or did deacon work. The text does not tell us the specific kind of deacon work that she did, but deacon work was always some kind of work to serve others. Just as Jesus did the deacon work of serving her by lifting her up in body and spirit, she responded by lifting up others through her own service. And all of this deacon work took place on the Sabbath, a holy day set aside for resting and worshipping God. A lesson of Jesus and Simon's mother-in-law for us is this: The work of a deacon, that is service to others, is always appropriate on a holy day or any other day, for service brings God's grace into any day and makes it sacred.

The story goes on to tell us that at sunset, meaning after the Sabbath had ended, all the people of the town who were sick or possessed by demons were to Jesus to be served by him. And he did serve them, doing the deacon work of healing and competing against the demons, which were no match for this deacon of God.

Today, deacons of God still struggle against the demons, and the deacons still win. This is good news for us, who face illnesses and demons in our own world and in our own lives. Service casts out demons. Service heals. Service makes even the most common moments and places holy.

Service can cast out the demon of selfishness and all terrible demons that come from it and make even long-ill and possessed people and societies more whole and healthy. Service can lift up the lowly. And the one who serves is herself or himself lifted up and made great. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love." And like an upward spiral, service generates more love and more grace, that the servant can be even more loving and gracious and all the more a great world changer.

On this day, when we are inspired by the greatness of amazing athletes, let us also be inspired by the greatness of the humble deacons in our midst. Let us be inspired by people like Captain Sir Tom Moore, who died this week at the age of 100 from Covid-19, but only after helping to raise many millions of pounds to support the health of his fellow British citizens. And let us be inspired by people like Officer Brian Sicknick, whose remains lay in honor this week in the U.S. Capitol, where he gave his life to serve and protect the people inside of that building as they were being attacked by a violent, destructive mob.

In the end, dear friends, illness does not win and the demon of selfishness and the destruction that comes from it does not win. Let us be rededicated today in our struggle against these through our own

service to others, that this day truly would be a super day, one marked by holiness and renewal. Amen.