

The first deacon: Mark 1:29-39

The Christian church was born with Simon Peter's mother-in-law.

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [January 27, 2009](#) issue

No one knows her name. She may have been widowed, for she lived with two younger men who were not her sons. Their boyish enthusiasms might have made her laugh. It's also pleasant to think that her daughter had inherited her features—whether she was stocky, or had a slender build and expressive eyes. Very likely she worked hard at chopping firewood and salting fish, helping to feed the household, watching her grandchildren. But one day she could do none of that, for she was sick in bed with a fever. Her daughter would have been nearby, applying a damp cloth to her forehead. All we can do is imagine these details, because we know strangely little about her.

Everyone knows Simon Peter's name. No one knows hers, even though what happened to her had a profound effect on Simon. She was on the verge of a major moment—for all of us. The Christian church was born with Simon's mother-in-law.

We probably haven't thought enough about the family relationships behind the early church. The disciples Simon Peter and Andrew were brothers, as were James and John. Jesus had several brothers. Several women named Mary seem to have had an unusually close relationship. Even Paul, for all his irascibility, brought relatives into the faith. The early church was very much a family affair, which makes sense, because even today it grows through relationships, one person at a time.

But let's get back to Simon's mother-in-law, who lay in a dangerous state, utterly helpless, dehydrated and delirious. Then Jesus came into her house—a brave and loving thing to do; a very *familiar* thing to do. He risked ritual uncleanness; risked catching her illness. It was the sort of thing a family member might do.

He took her by the hand and lifted her up. The very next sentence tells us her remarkable response. According to Mark, "she began to serve." The verb is *diekonei*,

and it tells us that in that instant, the church began. It was Simon's mother-in-law who first responded as so many others would, profoundly moved by the great change in her life. She was the first deacon, in the sense of becoming a servant out of reciprocal love.

Some would argue that this healing simply returned her to a place of subjugation in a patriarchal society, but it sounds to me as if she gave thanks. Her life had been saved. At least on that day, her everyday tasks were transformed and became miraculous.

The meal she served that night was like the meal that Martha and Mary would serve after Jesus saved their brother Lazarus. Or the meals that outcasts like Zacchaeus would serve after being welcomed as friends. Maybe it lasted into the wee hours of the night.

But that still doesn't quite capture this woman's impact on history. After all, her amazing recovery inspired Simon to leave his nets, leave Capernaum and follow Jesus. He wouldn't have been able to leave without her staying behind to watch over the family. Even Simon's wife would have been hard-pressed to keep him home after what happened; we can imagine both women encouraging him to go in their stead. Actually, years later, Simon's wife accompanied him on apostolic journeys (1 Cor. 9:5), which suggests that his mother-in-law remained in the story.

There's another illustration—coincidental, perhaps—by which we can gauge her impact. Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law at the very start of his ministry. At the end of it, her example of service became his. In gathering his disciples for a Last Supper, he took on the work of a deacon. He provided the meal; he even washed their feet. He told them that they must become "like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:26-27).

I've been blessed to know some remarkable women whose names may never be written large in church history, even though their influence has been widely felt. May I publicly thank Sharon Thornton, Muggs Jardine, Wanda Hubbell, Joretta Bethke? Every summer these matriarchs would help to put on a church dinner. Another woman couldn't help out one year, having just had a hip replacement. I went to check on her a day before the dinner.

“They’re not using boxed potatoes, are they?” she demanded. “The people who come expect potatoes made from scratch.”

“They’re planning to peel potatoes all morning,” I said.

“And the ham? Did they get a good dry ham, or the watery kind?”

Honestly, I didn’t know. It was probably the same ham as always. I asked if she had always enjoyed cooking, and to my surprise, she adamantly said no, that cooking was a big chore.

“Really? I thought you enjoyed doing this.”

“I don’t love the potatoes,” she said. “Really, young man, you should know I love Christ, and there are only so many ways a body can do that.”