

Holy Bubbles and Everyday Mysteries
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Mark 1: 29-31

There are many, many delightful practices I've come to appreciate at First Church in Cambridge. Indeed, it doesn't take me any time at all to cite examples of the abundant gifts and graces and generosity of this gathering. I brag about you, in fact. Perhaps you think the pious, sanctimonious sort of Christian who enrolls in seminary should be above all that: we're not. I'm not, anyway. When I recount to my classmates the variety of worship services and ministries, the depth of your welcome, and the kind and generous candor and love with which I have been blessed in my time with you, they are amazed.

Me too! I knew it would be good, but I could not have anticipated the myriad of ways in which serving as your seminarian would be *very* good.

One of the most amazing privileges I've had has been to participate in the healing services, held in October and again here March 5th at the 11 am service, and more frequently at Jazz 5:30. It's a time when, instead of a sermon, we invite people to come forward with concerns for a short interlude of listening, prayer and, if they choose, anointing. I'd not seen a service quite like this before, so with some anxiety I memorized the 8 or so elaborate variants on suggested prayer responses Mary kindly emailed a few days in advance. Oh, yeah, that helped a *lot!*

I find it interesting that the following words share the same root: healing, health, holiness, wholeness, wellness, meaning "full" or "complete." It makes sense, doesn't it? While praying with those who come forward during the healing services, with concerns spoken or those too deep for words, I've laid hands on shoulders, anointed foreheads with oil, and prayed – both on and off script. Trying to explain to others, later, I found I could only describe what was created as a Holy Bubble. A privileged, sacred and powerful place; a thin place, where our awareness of God's presence was acute. *Not* because Mary gave me the clergy-only, extra-potent magic prayer words, or that the olive oil we used was the super-duper, organic variety found at Whole Foods.

These moments were "Holy Bubbles" because the whole, holy, healing, full spirit of God was palpably alive – not only in the little clusters as we huddled in whispered, joyful, sometimes silent, sometimes tearful prayer, but to all who were present in worship at that time, all made whole in the larger Holy Bubble we shared.

It seems like this might be what it was like when Jesus took the hand of Peter's mother in law and lifted her up. It seems like the scripture passage from Mark describes a Holy Bubble, don't you think?

Which brings us to Grace. We don't know Simon Peter's mother in law's name, and while I'm aware that there is no way to authenticate this choice – for the purposes of this sermon I've named her "Grace." I asked Mary Luti if there was a name and a story assigned to this woman through "tradition", and she said not. So, I feel perfectly comfortable making this part up. We can talk at coffee hour if you have a better idea.

So, it looks like Grace is a goner. It's not on the scale of the avian flu; this isn't community-wide anguish and tragedy. This is just one woman's demise, her solitary and hot march to the grave. To be feverish in 1st century Palestine was code for a deathwatch.

Jesus responds to Peter's invitation – hear Peter now: "Oh, yes! By all means! Come to dinner. And by the way, we have a cook to heal. Yeah, sure – it'll be fine. Come to dinner. I really mean it." Jesus responds by showing up. And healing. And dinner is served.

I've always been annoyed by this passage. The heretofore-nameless woman gets healed, and what does she then do? Does she write the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" No, Grace does not do this.

Does she earn the Nobel Prize in both physics and chemistry? No, Grace doesn't even know about the germ theory of disease. Grace is not that much into science.

What does Grace do? Why is she remembered? She gets up from her sick bed, from her deathbed, and she goes to the kitchen. The *kitchen*?!

It seems she breaks the Holy Bubble. Can you imagine? Here's Jesus, lifting you up from the depths of your feverish deathbed and you have something better to do all of a sudden? Something that presses you onward, out of His presence and *toward the pots and pans*? Grace serves *them* dinner, for crying out loud. I'm thinking Peter and his no-name bride, Grace's daughter, and Jesus, and the rest of the boys should be doing the laundry, tidying up and making *Grace* a little restorative chicken soup, but no....

I'm reminded of a lovely essay by Kathleen Norris, [Quotidian Mysteries](#). Everyday, commonplace mysteries, ordinary mysteries.

In [Quotidian Mysteries](#), Kathleen Norris describes her first experience at a Roman Catholic Mass. She attends the wedding of her eventual husband's friend, a high-school pal with a massive and thoroughly Irish family. The clan is there in full force – 11 siblings of the groom, and that's just for starters. She's not been to a Catholic Mass before, and she finds herself mesmerized, though all the others are blasé. As the presiding priest concludes the Eucharist, she blurts out, "Look! Look at that! The priest is cleaning up! He's doing the dishes!"¹. Norris recognizes something elemental, something commonplace in this holy ritual, much to the amusement of the others. This liturgically hygienic moment is repeated in households all the time – you take a sponge, and with water and clean linens, you wipe the dishes clean.

You prepare them for the next time they will be used as a container for nourishment, for life.

My friend Milton Brasher-Cunningham observes that “whether Communion is served in silver trays or by intinction – where everyone comes forward, tears off a piece of bread from a common loaf, dips it in the common cup and then takes both elements together – either way – we *always* end up with leftovers. On the one hand, the fact that we have all eaten and there is still more is a helpful metaphor for the expansiveness of the love of God in Christ: regardless of how much we need, there is always more. God provides abundance.

Yet, as Milton watches folks come through the Communion line, tearing off pieces of bread so tiny that they cannot not dip them in the cup without getting their fingers wet, he wonders: Why do we come the Table of God for the Ultimate Meal and nibble at our food like kids being forced to eat broccoli for the first time? He observes that the focus on reverence in the meal in most churches has made us more aware of the precision of the plate passers than the power of the meal.

Milton wishes we felt the freedom to *talk* as we passed the elements, calling each other by *name*, telling *stories* of our faith, *forgiving* one another, (maybe even laughing together), certainly remembering why we gather together as the people of God. One day, Milton wants to share a Communion meal where each person has plenty of bread, and we drink wine from large glasses that can be refilled so we can talk late into the night, telling stories of how Love has found us.”ⁱⁱⁱ I want that, too. Don’t you?

Watch, after the service this morning – see if you notice what struck me powerfully after the first time I participated in communion here at First Church. After the service is over, while everyone is gossiping and lingering, bustling out the narthex door, or making their shakey way into Margaret Jewett Hall for coffee, watch for a gaggle of kids who march right up here – just like they belonged! – watch them scarf down the leftover communion bread! It’s amazing! It’s the enactment of what we say we believe, and they – these beautiful kids – they get it!

Milton wants to make Communion more of an ordinary family meal, in other words, or alternatively, Milton’s vision is to extend that Holy Bubble of completeness, the ephemeral moment of gratitude and wellness, of love and trust and the presence of God into every meal, into every donut hole of our lives.

What Holy Bubbles you would inhabit then! What quotidian mysteries you would experience! Just pulling simple foodstuffs off your shelves and sharing it with your thoroughly ordinary, holy families and your saintly friends!

So Grace arises from her sick bed and serves them dinner. It’s not elaborate; she’s been sick after all, so the meal she serves is only the best she can do that day. It’s just the basics. It’s a simple dinner of bread, and wine. I’m sure of it. The story Mark tells of the dinner Grace served doesn’t so much break the Holy Bubble as enlarge it, I’m thinking now. It isn’t as if her healing stopped; and it’s not as if Grace

didn't one day, eventually, die, perhaps even from a fever. Maybe Grace lived long enough to enjoy the laughter of her grandchildren; perhaps not. I forgot to ask Mary if there's the Christian Midrash about Peter's children...

Mark's story implies that Grace lived on at least for a while, so we can assume she gained in strength. Grace served more elaborate meals, perhaps, on days when she was feeling better, and in more ordinary circumstances. But they were holy meals, every quotidian and mysterious one of them. Meals like those Milton envisions: where, when we see how much we have leftover after we have passed the food around, the elements are sent out a second time, perhaps a third.

Grace indeed lives on, in the comfortable mystery of a plate of leftovers, in the abundance around a table when laughter vivifies the covenants that bind family and friends, renewed in the simplest of graceful gestures. What quotidian mysteries surround us each day; what gestures and glimpses of Grace we can see in the casual corners of our everyday life!

Grace and peace in the name of the One who bids us into the everyday mysteries and unexpected graces of the overflowing table!

Grace and peace in the name of leftovers! Amen.

ⁱ Kathleen Norris, "The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and 'Women's Work'", the 1998 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality, published by Paulist Press, New York, 1998, pages 1-3 passim.

ⁱⁱ Milton Brasher-Cunningham, Associate Pastor at the First Congregational Church of Hanover, UCC. This comes from an archived essay, "First Meal" posted on his blog: <http://www.donteatalone.blogspot.com>