

January 24, 2016

Abraham Lincoln's Finest Hour

Mark 1:29-34

Opening Words: We find ourselves today in the gospel of Mark. It was written in the year AD 68 by John Mark, who was a close associate of Peter. For this reason some have called this Gospel Peter's Gospel. It was written to the believers in Rome who were suffering under the hand of Nero, who blamed them for the famous fire in Rome in the year AD 64. The gospel was written to remind them that suffering was all part of the Christian experience.

In our reading for today, Jesus is in Capernaum. Jesus is with his first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John, on the Sabbath. The scriptures say it clearly. Jesus went to the synagogue and taught as one with authority and exorcized the demonic. When the worship was over, Jesus went to the home of Simon and Andrew for the main meal of the day. It is while Jesus is in this private residence, he is told that Simon's mother-in-law is sick. We do not know her exact illness. All we are told is that she had a fever and is in bed. Having compassion on her, the Master heals her. Her healing is not an isolated case. Later that evening, others come with their illnesses and Jesus heals them too. Our scripture reading for today is Mark 1:29-34. Let me call this message *Abraham Lincoln's Finest Hour*.

Mark 1:29-34 As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Perhaps the greatest name in American history is Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865). Everyone knows his story. Self-educated, he became a lawyer in Illinois and in time became our sixteenth president in 1860. His election was not embraced by all. Before he could be sworn into office, the country was divided over the issue of state's rights. (We still struggle with state's rights.) Lincoln sat in the oval office during the bloody years of the Civil War, tested time and time again. I believe, this story tells us of Abraham Lincoln's finest hour.

History tells us Abraham Lincoln often visited military hospitals during the Civil War to cheer up the wounded. On one occasion he saw a young soldier who was near death. Lincoln's heart was broken. "Is there anything I can do for you," asked the compassionate President. "Please write a letter to my mother," the young soldier replied. Unrecognized by the soldier, Lincoln sat down and wrote as the youth told him what to say. The letter read,

My Dearest Mother,

*I was badly hurt while doing my duty, and I won't recover.
Don't sorrow too much for me. May God bless you and Father.
Kiss Mary and John for me.*

The young man was too weak to go on, so Lincoln signed the letter for him and then added this postscript,

Written for your son by Abraham Lincoln.

Asking to see the note, the soldier was astonished to discover who had shown him such kindness. "Are you really our President," he asked. "Yes," was the quiet answer. We can admire Lincoln for many reasons. One of the reasons was his compassion. Do the people in your life consider you compassionate? Maybe this is a better question: Has there been a time your life when you needed some compassion?

Webster defines compassion as, "*A sympathy for the feeling of others, often including a desire to help.*" Compassion is important because our world can be a hard place. You know it is true. You don't have to be a soldier in a civil war to relate to that story. I have never met a person who never needed compassion. The world can be a hard place. Has anyone here felt victimized by life? You did absolutely nothing wrong and you tried your very best. The problem is, everything went wrong. Your entire world attacked you and you found yourself filled with self-pity. Emotionally exhausted, you felt completely alone in a world filled with seven billion people. Then, from a most unexpected source, God sent you someone who showed you kindness and compassion. The rest of the world questioned your motives and desires, but your angel only gave you peace. Compassion can be a powerful medicine. The scripture lesson for today is filled with compassion. If you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

Let me let you in on a little secret. It has become my custom to take a nap on Sunday afternoons. I have no proof to support the following statement, but I believe it is true. I expend more energy on Sunday morning than the rest of the week combined. I get up early on Sunday mornings to review my material and update my prayers. I participate in three worship services, which means I preach three times. I relate to countless people and try to remember everyone's story. I try to welcome everyone who enters our building. There is a certain amount of stress to my job. I try to be prophetic; I am speaking for God, yet I can't insult anyone. Some have real thin skin. I know it doesn't sound like much, but I find these few hours to be exhausting. When I leave the church after Sunday morning I am spent. I struggle with the simplest conversations because I can't focus. I eat a little lunch, turn off my cell phone and take a nap on the sofa. This fact is not exciting, but it is true.

According to the text today, Jesus was a better man than I. When Jesus left worship he didn't nap; he healed the sick. I don't just mean a healing, I mean a multitude of healings. Verses thirty-three and thirty-four say, *"The whole town (of Capernaum) gathered at the door (of Simon and Andrew's house), and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was."* One of those healings, the first one mentioned, was the mother-in-law of Simon Peter. Verse thirty is key to our understanding of this morning's message. It says she was healed because they told Jesus about her. I am not exactly sure who is included in the word "they", but "they" must have included Simon Peter. She may not have been healed if "they" had not told Jesus about her. "They" had compassion on her and got her some help. They got her the best help you can possibly get someone in need, Jesus. She benefited from their compassion. Do the people in your life consider you a compassionate person?

Today, I want to cultivate your compassionate side. I want to do this by giving three pieces of pastoral advice that you should never forget. Our world needs more compassionate people because our world has a surplus of struggling people. You can find the struggling everywhere. You can find them in your neighborhood. You can find them at work. You can find them at school. You can find them at church. Our world is filled with suffering, broken people who need compassion. So if you are ready to develop your compassionate side, say, **"Amen!"**

Compassion is sensitive to the needs of others.

First, never forget, compassion is sensitive to the needs of others. British statesman and financier Cecil Rhodes, whose fortune was used to endow the world-famous Rhodes Scholarships, was a stickler for correct dress—but apparently not at the expense of someone else's feelings. A young man invited to dine with the Rhodes arrived by train and had to go directly to Rhodes's home in his travel-stained clothes. Once there, he was appalled to find the other guests already assembled, wearing full evening dress. After what seemed a long time Rhodes appeared, in a shabby old blue suit. Later the young man learned that his host had been dressed in evening clothes too, but put on the old suit when he heard of his young guest's dilemma.

Simon's mother-law lay in bed with a fever. The story doesn't come with a medical chart with all of her test scores. The truth is, we don't know the source of her suffering. That is not important; all that is important is that others had compassion on her. They got her help. Does anyone in your life need help? Do you have anyone in your life that needs Jesus? If you do, say, **"Amen!"** Compassion is sensitive to the needs of others.

Compassion takes advantage of interruptions.

Second, never forget, compassion takes advantage of interruptions. Have you ever noticed there are times when your agenda and God's agenda don't match? You know the scene. You have a million things to do. You have a deadline to meet or a sea of people waiting for you. You are in a hurry trying to get it done in time and suddenly,

someone shows up who just has to talk to you. They have a problem and you are the only one that can help. I know it is hard, but remember, compassion takes advantage of interruptions.

Consider these ten Bible stories with me.

1. The Parable of the Good Samaritan
2. The Greatest Commandment
3. The Blessing of the Little Children
4. The Healing of the Ten Lepers
5. The Healing of the Paralytic
6. The Healing of the Man Blind from Birth
7. The Rich Young Ruler
8. Zacchaeus
9. Blind Bartimaeus
10. Nicodemus

What do they all have in common? They are all special moments in the Bible that were produced by interruptions. Jesus had compassion on these people and used these interruptions to do real ministry. Have you ever noticed there are times when your agenda and God's agenda don't match? The healing of Simon's mother-in-law was not on the agenda for the day, but Jesus healed her because this was an opportunity for true ministry. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Compassion is gracious.

Third and final, never forget, compassion is gracious. When I was in the Cleveland area I had a parishioner who claimed he hadn't missed church for fifty years. One day, I figured out he had heard 2600 sermons, plus the messages on the liturgical holidays. You do the math, fifty years times fifty-two weeks. I was impressed.

One year I got involved in the annual pulpit exchange. You know the event. It is a way to get to know other preachers in the area. I went to the Presbyterian Church, and the Lutheran Church minister came to my church. The Lutheran preacher was just great! He was new to the area and everyone was surprised to discover he was Korean. Mr. 2600 sermons saw the Lutheran minister and thought he was Japanese. He stood up from his pew and began yelling some ugly language. He said, "We fought them in the war. I don't have to listen to them in my church." He stormed out of the church, never to be seen again. Everyone wanted to know what happened. I wanted to know if he had heard a single word of those 2600 sermons. There is no room for prejudiced behavior in God's church. Compassion is gracious.

I really don't want to offend anyone, but I have to ask, how much of a difference is Jesus making in your life? How many sermons have you heard in your life? How many of those sermons altered your life? The world doesn't really care about your opinions. The world needs your compassion. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Let us end at the side of our dying Civil War soldier. You remember the soldier. He was wounded and Abraham Lincoln came to visit him. In time, the president wrote a letter home for him and said his good-bye's. The soldier couldn't believe the president's kindness and compassion. But he really couldn't believe it when the president said next, "Now, is there anything else I can do?" The lad feebly replied, "Will you please hold my hand? I think it would help me see this through to the end." With the weight of the world on his shoulders, Lincoln held the young man's hand until he died. In my opinion, it was Abraham Lincoln's finest hour.

How many hands have you held during life's most difficult moments? The situation may not be death, it may be divorce. The situation maybe a family, it may be a personal pain. It may be disease, it may be disappointment. How many hands have you held? How many people in your life need compassion? Alexander Maclaren once said, *"Kindness and compassion make a person attractive."* And all of God's compassionate people said, **"Amen!"**