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this way forward

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF JESUS
THE TITLES OF OUR LORD: COMPASSIONATE HEALER
Mark 1:29-39
February 4, 2018
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This week's passage immediately follows last week's in which Jesus' exorcism has created a reputation. There is a buzz growing around this Nazarene and along with it, scores of people are seeking him out.

This includes his new disciple, Simon Peter, who asks for help. And so, he enters Simon's house and heals his mother-in-law of a fever.

We began this series in Mark exploring grand titles. Beloved Son of God, and the eternal Son of Man. But Mark's story now moves into more intimate circles and today we discover a compassionate healer as well.

Jesus heals her and immediately she gets up and starts to cook. At first glance, this is almost a comical response and so stereotypical of the Jewish or Italian mother who lives to feed and fatten her flock.

But I think there is something more to it. Remember last week, we learned that because of the profound brevity of Mark's gospel, each word or phrase teaches us something critically important about the life of faith. Mark could have left this detail out. Some might say it serves to underscore how effective the healing was. Nonsense! We all know mothers get up to serve their guests even when they are sick. That proves nothing!

No, I think there is something deeply theological about this detail. When you encounter the master's compassion, you are compelled to share it.

It is an intrinsic response to get up and serve once you have been touched by the holy one, the Rabbi, the Son of God, the Son of Man.

In one sense, she is the first deacon. She is certainly the first one to serve in that capacity after being touched by our Lord. The word used here by Mark is diakoneo, the word we translate as deacon, meaning to serve. Now granted, it may be a stretch to think it was being used as a title, but still it shows us something fundamental about our call to serve-- where it comes from within us.

When we convince our will that we should be helping out of some obligation or payback to God, it leads to burn out. Think about how the hippie protesters in the 70's became the Yuppie bankers of the 90's. Think about the weight and the guilt you feel for all that you have not done that you could have done. Sometimes it may make you feel like tearing your heart out!

But this burn out happens when we look to the wrong source within us to drive us to action. When we look to our own mind, our own heart, our own will that is tainted by our inevitably broken selves, that are still filled with selfish desires and weakness, we will inevitably feel unworthy even if we serve. We can never do enough to make up for everything and we can never fix the deep problems of this world. We will feel inadequate.

We all have this within ourselves, myself included.

Instead of acting out of duty, this woman instinctively responds to the touch of our Lord.

To serve from the wellspring of Christ's love puts us on much more solid ground. First off, upon feeling his power, she would instantly know that "He has the whole world in his hands." That the destiny of this world, its justice, its peace, its wholeness and our wholeness is fully and squarely within the most capable hands in the universe. This creates a measure of calm and peace within us - a more centered self.

Second, when we do go and serve, we are under no illusions that we can fix the world. Instead, we do what we can with all that we are from a position of freedom and confidence, not in ourselves but in the power of our Lord. We realize that our actions of compassion are meant to reflect and amplify that compassion of God not to stand or fall on their own merit.

And his commitment to us beyond his immediate mission gives us the confidence in his love.

Now, not just anyone can exorcise a demon as in the previous story, but a fever would presumably leave the woman all on its own. And yet, he healed her. His compassion begins to show beyond his power or perhaps even his common sense, frankly. Jesus must have known that such a healing could lead to every person with a hangnail asking for help and this is precisely what happens.

Once this healing takes place, suddenly we are told "the whole city was gathered around the door!" And Jesus proceeds to heal scores of people but still does not want them to know who he is so the text tells us he would not "permit the demons to speak because they knew him."

The exorcism from last week's text left people in awe of his power and astounded that his teaching carried authority over demons. It has left them wondering about Jesus. And yet, he is careful not to reveal too much yet. He wants them to get to know him before they know who he is. Like the wealthy man or woman who wants

people to love them for who they are not for their money. Jesus wants people to follow him not because of his prestige but his presence.

We also know that crowds are notoriously fickle. Think about how quickly someone rockets to fame than flames out in today's world. In fact, in the music world, there is a whole genre called one hit wonders. Remember "Ice, Ice Baby" by Vanilla Ice, "Take on Me" by A-Ha or "The Macarena" by...well just who was that again? Well almost no one really knows...or cares. Although at the time, it seemed the world could tell you. Everybody knew and even octogenarians could do the dance as well, if you please.

So, Jesus knew the fickleness of the crowds who were looking for a Pez Dispenser Jesus but on that day, he cared less about their fickleness and more about the ailing and suffering of fellow human beings.

When people bring the sick to him, he inevitably heals them. His compassion does not allow him to do otherwise, his basic humanity then is one of empathy and understanding.

Think for a moment about our modern healers. How hard it must be for the doctors and nurses to hold onto compassion. The system, the bureaucracy, the profit machinery, the hours, the lawsuits all suck out humanity from the process. It is not amazing how few doctors empathize, rather, it is amazing to find those who still can despite everything they face.

But such work even takes its toll on Jesus.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the next day, Jesus cannot be found. Nobody knows where he has gone. Once again, the text contains volumes. It does not simply say "they looked for Jesus". It says, they "hunted for him!"

Hunting conveys a desperation that we might reasonably assume was born from the

scores, perhaps hundreds, more who had shown up the next morning looking for a miracle.

The disciples had nothing to give them. Perhaps the crowds were growing desperate, maybe even beginning to turn, who knows. But once again, the passage reminds us of the humanness of Jesus.

We are told he went to a deserted place, in order to pray. Perhaps Jesus' soul was being torn in two. On the one hand, his heart felt for these people. Their suffering was his suffering. Surely part of him wanted to stay. Surely if he stayed around them he might never leave.

So, he goes to a quiet place to connect to God to find the focus and the strength of will to do what he knows he needed to do.

The prayer gives him the courage he needs to leave this people even knowing their desperation. Jesus' humanity; means he needs the power source of God to remain clear, strong centered in purpose; this lets us know he really is human; and how we as humans can also find strength of will and clarity of purpose, through spending time alone with God.

Once the disciples find him, Jesus tells them "Let us go on to the neighboring towns so that I may proclaim the message there for that is what I have come to do."

Jesus knows he has something more powerful to offer ALL PEOPLE, to all of us ailing in the soul not just the sick in body; so even though it surely pained him he said, "I must go."

He must and he did, go to proclaim the good news of the gospel that Jesus Christ came into the world to love it and to save it.

Amen.