

February 7, 2021

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
Sympathy and Compassion  
Mark 1:29-39

**Opening words:** According to the Revised Common Lectionary, today is the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany. The Gospel reading for today is Mark 1:29-39. Biblical commentators tell us that the healing of Peter's mother-in-law is important because it underscores the main point from last week's text, the authority of Jesus. I cannot disagree with that. It is true. The scriptures time and time again tell us of Jesus' authority. Jesus had authority over both the spiritual and physical worlds. Jesus had control over nature too. The authority of Jesus cannot be questioned. However, there is more to our reading for today. I find it to be a story of compassion. It is found in every corner. Take the next line seriously. It is not just a story of sympathy. It is a story of compassion. There is a great difference between compassion and sympathy. Webster defines sympathy as, "*pity for other's misfortune.*" Webster defines compassion as, "*pity for other's misfortune, leading to a desire to help.*" Sympathy is simply an emotion. Compassion is deeper. Compassion motivates us to help. Are you just a sympathetic person? Are you a compassion person, who is willing to help? May we never forget Jesus had compassion on us sinners. Let me call this message today *Sympathy and Compassion.*

**Mark 1:29-39** As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. 32 That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. 35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Once again, we find ourselves in the first chapter of Mark. Today's story is nothing more than a continuation of last week's story. So, the background material remains the same. Jesus is still in Capernaum. Jesus is still with his first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John. It is still the Sabbath. You remember the story. Jesus went to the synagogue to worship and teach. He taught as one with authority. Not on the agenda that day was an exorcism. It was quite a scene. The whole community must have been

abuzz about the exorcism and Jesus's healing power. When 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 that he is told that Simon's mother-in-law is sick. We do not know her exact condition. We are only told she is sick and in bed. Her exact problem is not important. The only thing that is important is that Jesus healed her. However, Jesus' day was not over. According to the text, Jesus was a better man than me. (No surprise there!) After worship, I take my weekly Sunday afternoon nap. After worship, Jesus healed many in Capernaum. The healing of the demonic had spread so people brought their loved ones to Jesus to be healed. Those healings drained Jesus. Early the next morning, he retreated to a deserted place to pray. In the end the disciples find him, and Jesus relocates the ministry. It is a great story.

It is a great story because it drips with compassion. Think about it for a moment. The people in the story are not just sympathetic. The people in the story are compassionate. Sympathy only feels, compassion helps. Peter's mother-in-law would have remained ill and maybe died, but the people had compassion on her and got her help. Verse 30 says, "they immediately told Jesus about her." If "they" would have remained silent, then she would not have been healed. The news of the healing spread rapidly. By that evening many sick and diseased people were arriving because their loved ones had compassion on them. Verse 34 says, "Jesus healed many of their various diseases and exorcised more on that evening." No one would have been healed or exorcised if their loved ones if their loved ones only had sympathy on them. They were healed and exorcised because their loved ones had compassion on them. Jesus, himself, had compassion on the afflicted and healed many. In the end, Jesus is exhausted and is forced to retreat to a quiet place to rest.

Never underestimate the power of compassion. It has a way of softening our hard world. We respect compassionate people because they remind us the world is not all bad. There are still people who want to help those less fortunate. Ours is not the first generation. The compassionate have always existed.

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) is remembered as a compassionate man. He often visited the hospitals during the Civil War to cheer up the wounded. He had sympathy for all the wounded. Occasionally he had compassion. On one such occasion, he saw a young soldier, who was near death. "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 will not recover. Do not 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.*

Seconds later, the young man awoke. He asked 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. You cannot tell me Abraham Lincoln did not have a compassionate side. However, it is not just true in history. Compassion is still softening our hard world today.

His name is Henry Darby. His story was told by NBC last week. By day he is the principle at South Carolina's North Charleston High School. By night he stocks shelves at the local Walmart. He is not working those extra hours because he needs to money. He is working those extra hours to help his students who are in need. Every cent he makes goes to them. There is a surplus of need in his school. There are students living under bridges. There are students living in cars. There are students sleeping on an old-stained mattress in unheated trailers. Hard hit by the Coronavirus, 90% of the student body in North Charleston, South Carolina live below the poverty line. To ease his grandchildren's financial burden, that is what he calls his students, he got a job at Walmart in the middle of the night. On the days he works those extra hours, he gets two hours of sleep a night. His humility is impressive. He said, "You just do what you need to do." The only thing he asks of his students is to pay it forward. Henry Darby's story grabbed my attention and my heart. Every night I go to bed, I think of Mr. Darby stacking shelves at Walmart to help other people. He is not just a man of sympathy, who feels bad for his students, He was a man of compassion, who does his best to help. How do you question his compassion? It is not that hard to find compassionate people. I found one at home.

For over a decade, my wife Kathryn and I traveled to Russia to help orphans. It was really her ministry. I would go to support her. Those children were her passion. She did all the work. With little help, she handled the finances, the passports, and the visas to get into the evil empire. She made the plane reservations. She had the contacts in Russia. She raised the money to pay for the orphans needed items, like shoes and medicines. She did it all and never took a single cent. As she spoke at one group after another about the orphans, people would say, "I cannot go because I would want to adopt them all." That line got old. I knew that was not true because the orphans smelled too bad. Each orphan had a heavy scent of body order. They tried to mask it with men's cologne women's perfume. This is the truth. Some did not want to go. Some could not go. Some were afraid to go. Some could not get over the politics. I can only speak for myself. I am glad I went, and I would still be going, if not for Vladimir Putin. He has his own problems today.

If you ask Kathryn about those trips, she will bring up Vlad. She has a special bond with him. He was a social orphan. His parents were alive, but they gave him to the state because he had no legs. He lost them at twelve years old while jumping off railroad cars in Moscow. In his orphanage many of the children had severe disabilities. She really could not help them, but she could help Vlad. If Vlad had been born in America, he would be fitted with prosthetic legs, but he was born in Russia and was given a wheelchair and placed in an orphanage. She was determined to help him, and she did. She raised the needed funds, over \$20,000. She got in touch with doctors. She got permission from the orphanage to bring him to America. Vlad lived with us for several months so the work could be completed. Not every day was rewarding. In time, because of those legs, he moved out of the institution and lives independently. We still communicate with Vlad. She still helps Vlad, financially. Like most Russians, he has a hard life, but he is thankful he is not living in an institution. He is thankful he has a future. He has a future because a Christian woman did not just have sympathy for him. He has a future because a Christian woman had compassion for him. The Dalai Lama (born 1935) once said, *"Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive."* If you will agree compassion is important say, **"Amen!"** Has there ever been a time in your life when needed some compassion? Let me answer that question. The answer is YES!

This is the good news for today! Jesus was not just sympathetic about our problem with sin. Jesus was compassionate about our problem with sin. In other words, Jesus did not just feel bad for us, he helped us. You know the story. Jesus was born in the ordinary way, yet he lived an extraordinary life. For three years, he was involved in active ministry and did not do a single thing wrong. He loved everyone and never committed a single sin. He deserved a large prize, but, instead, he received an ugly cross. During Passover, his enemies unleashed their horrible plan. On Friday Jesus was nailed to a cross, a Roman form of execution. Once dead, they took his lifeless body down and placed it in a new tomb. On Saturday, his enemies celebrated because Jesus was dead. On Saturday, his loved ones grieved because Jesus was dead. On Sunday, those two groups had their lives turned upside down. It was early in the morning when a handful of women showed up at Jesus's tomb. To their society they were second class citizens. To God they were something special. God entrusted them with a message that would change the world. Jesus had returned from the dead. For forty days, the resurrected Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God and proved to everyone he was not a ghost. His was a bodily resurrection. He required food to be satisfied. At the end of the forty days he ascended into heaven, where he is today. The Apostle Paul understood the power of that resurrection. In Romans 6:23 Paul wrote, *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."* In other words, Jesus was not just sympathetic to our sin problem, feeling bad. Jesus was compassionate to our sin problem and died on the cross so we could live! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**