

“Compassion or Salvation?”
Mark 1:29-39
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 4, 2018

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, *And he went throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Have you noticed that after four weeks of the Epiphany season, our gospel reading is *still* from Mark 1. There’s so much packed into that first chapter because there’s so much to make known about “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” It’s been made known that:

- Jesus’ baptism “ushered in” (if you will) this era of the heavens being opened and the kingdom of God being at hand.
- ... that Jesus quickly gathered about him men who would be the first fishers of men, that He might immediately begin teaching those who would spread the gospel into all the world
- ... that Jesus came with authority – not only the *ability* – but the *right* to exercise such power – in bringing the kingdom of heaven, laying down his life and taking it up again, and conveying to us the fruits of his cross, most especially the forgiveness of sins.

Today’s text adds to this “beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” an *assurance of Jesus’ compassion*, while subtly reminding us that such

compassion for the sick is not the heart of the gospel, but does and will forever flow from the heart of the gospel.

Let's consider both of those truths: first, that the Jesus who comes with the authority to bring the kingdom of heaven is not aloof to our temporal suffering; he's not *so* focused on eternal life that he can't sympathize with our daily need. We often think that way, that our God can help us with the forgiveness of sins, but isn't attuned to daily life's headaches and heartaches. (How often folks claim that Christ's doctrine is unsympathetic to and out-of-touch with daily life!)

But, in our text, Jesus leaves the synagogue and goes to Peter's house to greet Peter's mother-in-law, who lays ill with a fever. (How much we might wish for such a visit right now, with this cold/flu virus seemingly a regular guest in our homes!) But, allow that wish to help you interpret this text rightly: there's nothing here that claims that Peter's mother was near death; nothing to imply that her fever was worse than your fever, so you should never ask God to heal your fever because yours isn't a fever that can match (in need for divine intervention) this woman's fever.

We're always looking for Jesus to do the big and amazing, then we despair when we wonder why we don't see it in our own lives. Is it possible that Peter's mother-in-law could have died from her fever? Probably just as possible as us dying – especially infants and elderly – from the flu virus that's been troubling us. And yet, the

Lord knows where He desires to grant us healing as he granted this woman healing, and we get back to normal life, just as this woman got back to her service to the household, and we often don't think twice about the fact that such healing is not merely "the body fighting off the virus," but is God's compassion toward us. (For, truly, the body couldn't even inhale its next breath without the Lord being mindful of us!)

Indeed, we have a compassionate God; you can look all around you in the created order *and in the temporal healing of consequences of the fallen creation*, and you can be reminded that our Lord is not aloof or unsympathetic to our daily life needs, but is compassionate toward us in ways we so often take for granted.

We often fail to meditate upon this, and our Old Testament reading helps us see this: when we think of the God who created the earth, we think of a dominant, all-powerful God who

"sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness."

With Isaiah, when we think of the God who created the heavens and the earth, we often think of the God who is beyond compare, who laughs at and derides the foolish attempts to compare the world's idols and idolatrous ways to His unending governance over the earth.

But we often forget that He cares for and is sympathetic toward his creation... He doesn't just "bring out the host by number," but also "calls them all *by name*." So, why do we with Jacob, say, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God?"

Not so! "Have you not known? Have you not heard?... He does not faint or grow weary" of caring for you, but "gives power to the faint and to him who has no might he increases strength."

Yes, how often we forget the *compassion* of our God! How often we forget that it's in the explanation of the *first* article of the Creed – I believe in the God who *created* me – that Luther teaches us to know our God provides for us, protects us, and preserves us.

But, as people think on this, they begin to see it as the measure and sum of the Gospel. The cities of the world will come to the door of wherever Jesus stays if he will just grant them physical healing. They will follow him around the Sea of Galilee if he will only feed them more bread. But, as our text reminds us, such compassion in things temporal is not the heart of the gospel, nor is it even our greatest need.

We learn this when Simon finds Jesus and says, "Everyone is looking for you," and Jesus' answer shows he knows the desires of their heart: "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." He knew the crowds would chase them for healing and miracles, but apparently at the expense of

hearing the good news. (Though he *had* preached to them the good news, it was time to move on.)

Is that the trap we are so often tempted to fall into? To measure God's gospel by health and daily bread... to judge based on improvement of *daily* life rather than to take heart in the Word of *eternal* life?

But, as compassionate as is our Lord, he will not allow that compassion toward our *daily* need become the focus of the gospel or of your heart. How tragic would it be for us if the gospel were simply that Christ cared for us to forever limp along in this fallen world! And that's the second point of truth that I mentioned at the sermon's beginning. Christ's compassion toward our frailties is not the heart of the gospel, but *flows from* the heart of the gospel. The gospel itself is: the Messiah's perfect obedience and substitutionary death as an answer to our sin and for our redemption ... the gospel itself is: our salvation from being *enemies* of God to being *children* of God.

When God addressed Adam in the garden, He spoke to him the first gospel – the seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head by suffering – and on the heels of that gospel spelled out the consequences of life in a fallen world: "In toil you shall labor all your days... you are dust and unto dust you shall return." That didn't undo or overshadow or render obsolete and out-of-touch the promises of the gospel; it *underscored* the truth that the gospel focuses our hope not on restoring this fallen creation, but on the life of the new

creation ... so that our greatest need is not *improvement of life*, but unity with God through the forgiveness of sins – for it is only this Triune God who has the ability and authority to raise us up from the dead and bring us to the life of the world to come.

Thus, this will always be our compassionate God’s focus. Consider the end of the gospel reading: “And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.” Notice, in the verses above, he was preaching, casting out demons *and healing*. But Mark doesn’t include that as Jesus goes on to the next towns... perhaps Jesus chose *not* to heal, not because he’s suddenly not compassionate (as if he loves one town more than the next!), but maybe because he knew the crowds would cling to the temporal compassion rather than the eternal Gospel... or maybe because he knew how temporal compassion fit into his plans for eternal life. Perhaps the Holy Spirit simply didn’t want Mark to record that Jesus did heal. But it’s quite clear that the emphasis is on preaching and casting out the demons.

Isn’t that what the heart of the gospel looks and sounds like, not just at “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” but also in these latter days of the gospel being delivered to the nations? Preaching and casting out demons – there’s the heart of the gospel! Isn’t that casting out of demons exactly what happens in baptism or in the being brought to faith by the hearing of the Word? We might forget that because the casting out isn’t quite the spectacle it must

have been in those Galilean towns, but the truth of the matter is just the same – the child of darkness is made a child of God’s light. And where the unclean spirits have been evicted and the Holy Spirit has made his dwelling, the Lord warns against letting those unclean spirits back in. And to guard against such an open door, the Lord continually preaches – preaches Law and Gospel – convicts us of our sin, proclaims our forgiveness, teaches us anew, and strengthens us in the faith that (1) clings to His Word, (2) rejoices in His compassion, (3) level-headedly approaches life in this fallen world, and (4) eagerly anticipates the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.

So, we do not have to pit God’s compassion in daily life against His focus on our eternal life. It’s not an either/or... just as He does not give *either* spiritual gifts in the Divine Service *or* temporal gifts in daily bread. He is not *either* compassionate and promises all things here and now – *or* – promising of eternal life but rather indifferent and not compassionate regarding your afflictions along the way. Rather, his compassion toward you flows from and is defined by His eternal plans for you. Is it better to be healed in this life, or to face death bravely in anticipation of eternal life? Paul found himself caught between the two; he tells the Philippians,

“For to me, to live is Christ, to die is gain. If I go on living in the body, it means fruitful labor for me. So what shall I choose? I do not know. I am torn between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.”

Notice how the Christian views temporal life and death: we ought rejoice in this earthly life, thanking God for it and its blessings, and seeing it as opportunity for “fruitful labor” in faith toward God and in fervent love toward one another. But, if such is not much longer God’s plan for us, are we going to grow bitter and despondent? No, we know that to depart and be with Christ is far better. We know the endgame... that life at the foot of the cross is just “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” ... just the beginning of “an *eternal* gospel to proclaim” (Rev. 14:6).

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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