

"The Action of Grace in Territory Held Largely by the Devil"

Mark 1:21-34

5 November 2017

Flannery O' Connor said, *"Often the nature of grace can be made plain only by describing its absence."* (*Mysteries and Manners*, "In the Protestant South")

Many times the nature of grace can be made plain only by describing its absence. That's what Mark is doing in his gospel. He is showing us the absence of grace in this fallen, broken world. He is showing us how Adam's sin plummeted this world into ruin and brought on sin, death, disease, and destruction. But then Mark shows us Jesus entering those "graceless" places, those territories where God's grace is absent, those places where the Fall of Adam has reared its ugly head. In Mark's gospel, we see Jesus bringing grace to people who desperately need it.

I love this section of Mark. I've fallen more in love with Jesus this week as I camped out in these verses. What a Savior. He gets interrupted while He's preaching and yet He moves out in compassion. He goes home to rest and gets interrupted and then ends up breaking a bunch of cultural norms, but He does it so that He can take away a woman's fever. Then He gets interrupted again and spends His evening with a bunch of social outcasts, with people who have mental issues, the demon-possessed, the poor, people who smell, people who are sick, who are covered in sores, etc, and He heals them. He spends time with them. Then He wakes up in the morning and tries to get away to pray and He gets interrupted again.

What's happening in Mark is just an invitation from Jesus for us to interrupt Him and see His grace invade our lives. It's a reminder that our needs are not below Jesus. And what we'll see today is Jesus just giving and giving and giving Himself away for the good of others- bringing grace to the places where it is absent. He's letting His calendar and schedule get interrupted and having to take a backseat to the people in front of Him- people who most likely were neglected by society.

What a Savior. He's spending all His time and energy on ordinary, broken people who are hurting and have no value in the eyes of the world. He fills His schedule up with nobodies. And in the process, He's teaching His newly called disciples about life and ministry in the kingdom of God.

Remember what we saw last week? Jesus called His first disciples and told them that He would make them become fishers of men. And then where does Jesus take them? To the hospitals. To the psych wards. To the ghettos. Across the tracks. In *that* part of town that nobody wants to go to. That's where they will learn to be fishers of men. In the places and with the people that nobody wants. The disciples are being taught theology as they are surrounded by sick people, poor people, demon-possessed people. As we watch, we see that Jesus doesn't seek out the upscale. He doesn't seek out the movers and shakers. He seeks out those who are wounded, broken, injured, messy, exhausted, and hopeless; those who know they need a Savior. And the first lesson that the disciples will learn is this-

JESUS CARES.

Jesus wants to teach the disciples that He cares about us. That no need is below Him. That, as Isaiah said about Him, *"...a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench"* (Isaiah 4:3). That's what we'll see today. Jesus gently handling bruised reeds. Jesus not quenching faintly burning wicks. Now, I know we all *know* that Jesus cares, but sometimes we don't believe it. And that's why we have a date with Mark today. It's why we're binge-watching Jesus- to be reminded once again and to really feel in our bones that Jesus cares for us.

LOOK AT VERSES 21-28...

And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

The first thing that Mark tells us right away is that right after Jesus called these 4 disciples, He takes them to Capernaum. This was intentional. And there's a reason that Jesus chose this village. Capernaum means the "Village of Nahum," or "Village of Compassion." Jesus took Peter, Andrew, James, and John to the village of compassion because He wants them to catch a glimpse of His own heart. The first lesson that Jesus teaches these disciples is what role compassion plays in ministry, what role mercy play in making

disciples. Jesus wants these rough, blue-collar fishermen to see just how compassionate and merciful He is. And He will show them at the synagogue, a place these men were very familiar with.

Synagogues in Israel were Jewish meeting places where the Mosaic law would be read and studied, where people prayed, where people disciplined their children, as well as a place where they had other community events. And most significant communities in Israel had a synagogue and some larger cities even had several synagogues. And these are the places where Jesus often ministered and taught God's word. Jesus, like any grown man who was approved by the synagogue elders, could read and teach from the Torah in the synagogue. And the fact that Jesus is teaching in the synagogue here in Mark 1 shows us that He had done it before and was already approved by the synagogue elders to be a teacher. In other words, this was not Jesus' first go round as a Sunday school teacher.

And as Jesus is teaching, He gets interrupted, rather rudely, by a man possessed by a demon. This was like *The Exorcist* movie. Picture this man screaming at Jesus, "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.*"

This demon-possessed man that entered the synagogue while Jesus was teaching was unclean and therefore he should not have been there. This is Satan provoking Jesus. Satan and Jesus just did battle for 40 days in the wilderness, and as we see here, Satan has no desire to stop his relentless barrage of attacks on Jesus to try and stop His mission of living and dying for sinners.

Notice too that it's the demon that initiates the conversation with Jesus. This guy just interrupts his sermon and starts provoking Jesus. He wants to derail Jesus' plans by telling the crowd who Jesus is so that they will try and speed up His popularity and crown Him as king before He goes to the cross.

And this is why Jesus tells him to shut his face. "*Be silent, and come out of him!*" Now, why would Jesus not want people to know that He was the Messiah? That He was the Holy One of God? Here's why: Because Jesus knew people's hearts. Jesus knew that people would immediately want to crown Him as king and then beg Him to overthrow the Roman government. That's why Jesus repeatedly tells people not to tell others who He is and what He has done for them. Jesus did not come to overthrow Rome and be king. He came to lay His life down as a ransom for many. He came to go to the cross, not just set up a kingdom. And as we saw over the past few weeks, Jesus came to be the Second Adam- to live and die in our place and then, someday in the future, establish the kingdom of God in all its fullness.

And when Jesus casts the demon out of this man, that action, the exorcism is the kingdom of God advancing. God is reigning in that moment. He is getting done what He wants done. But Jesus did not come to set up His kingdom on the earth before He went to the cross. The cross was always His plan, which is why Jesus rebukes Peter later in this gospel when Peter tries to stop Jesus from going to the cross. Jesus actually calls Peter "Satan" in Mark 8 when Peter rebukes Jesus and tries to shut down His mission.

So I think this demon is trying to derail His mission, but Jesus will have none of it. He tells the demon to shut up and leave the man. So the demon throws the man on the ground, he starts convulsing and shaking, and then with a very loud scream, it finally leaves. And the man is whole again. Jesus healed this man and restored him to wholeness and well-being. And everyone at church that day was shocked. They would remember Jesus' sermon because He had authority. That's what they mean when they say that Jesus teaches with authority: He teaches *and* can cast out demons. The demons obey Him. They had never seen a scribe or Pharisee do this. This Rabbi can back up what He is teaching.

And Mark makes the very first miracle in his gospel the exorcism of this demon-possessed man because Mark wants us to know right away that a cosmic war is unfolding between Jesus and the devil. We saw that with Jesus' temptations, but that was in the wilderness. This exorcism happens during church, after the music has ended, after the offering is taken up. And Mark records it at the very beginning of his gospel in order to remind us that Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). Jesus came to have compassion on sinners who were bound in different ways and to set them free. Jesus came to invade Satan's territory.

Peter will mention this episode in Mark's gospel in one of his sermons in the book of Acts:

As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. Acts 10:36-38

Peter remembered what happened at the synagogue that day and what would unfold in his house later that evening. This first lesson that the disciples are being taught in Capernaum was burned into Peter's

memory because he quotes it later. Jesus picked the "Village of Compassion" to give the disciples a glimpse of His heart as He moved out in compassion and healed this demon-possessed man and many others later that evening. Most rabbis would not choose to go to the down and out, to the injured, to the sick, to the poor, to lepers, and certainly not to the demon-possessed. Most rabbis would not choose an exorcism as their first lesson to a bunch of green students fresh off their fishing boats. But Jesus is not like other rabbis. He will take His disciples to places that they would not choose to go in order to see God's grace in action.

Mark would agree that his gospel writing is much like Flannery O' Connor's, who said this about her work: *"I have found, in short, from the reading of my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil."* (*Mysteries and Manners*, "On Her Own Work")

That's Mark's gospel. He is writing about the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil. And that grace invaded the territory of the devil in that synagogue that day.

But don't miss this. Jesus cast the demon out of the man because that man was a *person*. He could have just told the demon to shut up and left the man this way, but Jesus knew that, perhaps, this demon-possessed man was a father, a husband, a son, and a brother. Jesus knew that he needed his life back.

And then Jesus just goes from this magnificent moment, this exorcism in church, to healing Peter's mother-in-law, who just has a fever. A fever that she could take some Tylenol for. A fever that would go away in a few days. And so you have these moments that are not meaningless and insignificant to Jesus. It doesn't matter if it's a very big problem, like a demon living inside of you, or a very small problem, like a fever. It doesn't matter if it's an exorcism or helping someone with a fever-

JESUS CARES.

And there are people here today, I'm sure, who don't believe this. People who are believing the lies of the devil. People who know the Bible- you know that Jesus cares, but you're not believing it at this moment. Well, listen to your pastor. I may be an idiot- I'll freely admit that- *I can be an idiot*- but I know at least one thing about Jesus: He cares. You need to tell yourself, tell your heart today that Jesus cares.

You are loved, brothers and sisters. Jesus cares about all the details of your life. Everything about you and your life concerns Him. It matters to Him. That thing that's stressing you out right now, that's keeping you up at night, that's taken away your appetite, that's make you toss and turn in bed- that thing matters to Jesus. Let that sink in.

But another stunning element to Jesus' ministry is that the healing of this demon-possessed man, as well as the healings that will occur in the next episode, they all occur *on the Sabbath*. In order to understand what is happening, we have to have a proper understanding of the Sabbath in Jesus' day. It was from sundown Friday evening to sundown Saturday evening. The Sabbath had become a symbol of the eschatological rest or *shalom* that God would one day usher in when the kingdom of God came in its final fullness. The Sabbath was a symbol of the dominion of God, the kingdom of God.

So when Jesus heals on the Sabbath, He is deliberately ushering in the "already" aspect of the kingdom of God. And if God was going to heal humanity finally and fully in the age to come, and the Sabbath was a symbol of that, then what better day to heal someone on than the Sabbath? Jesus would say, *"Exactly."* This, of course, we know will become something that the religious leaders of the day hate about Jesus because He does not conform to their man-made rules. He is obedient to Scripture, not the traditions of men.

In the Mishnah, an ancient Jewish commentary, it says that the scribes and Pharisees should "make a fence around the Law" (Tractate Avoth 1.1). Meaning, they so wanted to protect God's law from being violated that they came up with man-made rules to keep people from breaking God's commandments. The Mishnah states that, *"The tradition is a fence around the law"* (Tractate Avoth 3.14). So for instance, in order to "keep the Sabbath" and not do work on the Sabbath, the Pharisees came up with rules governing *how far you could walk* on the Sabbath and it not be considered working on the Sabbath. So there were hundreds of these man-made rules that were very petty and detailed. And the religious leaders came up with these because they did not want people breaking God's laws. And they would enforce these laws as if they were God's law.

Of course, Jesus will not break God's law and sin, but He will challenge all of these man-made rules that were brought up to the same level as God's law. And what Jesus does on the Sabbath will break many of these man-made rules. And that's why Jesus will have a target on His back from the religious elite.

And so what happens after this church exorcism? Jesus' fame begins spreading. His popularity is growing. So what does He do? Does He ink a book deal? Does he appear on *Good Morning America*? Does He appear on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*? Does He start speaking at *The Gospel Coalition* conferences? No.

Jesus doesn't want the fame. As Zack Eswine says, "*Jesus is fame-shy.*" He's not out to make a name for Himself. He could have started a blog and a podcast and got a book deal. Jesus could have sat around and signed autographs and reveled in the praise and adoration of the crowd. I mean, this was a big deal! He cast a demon out of a man and everyone saw it! Jesus could have totally taken advantage of this to spread His popularity. He could have tweeted about it. But what does he do? He tells the demon to shut its face and then Jesus "immediately" hightailed it out of the synagogue and goes to the home of an unknown fisherman- Peter. He just goes to the small home of a poor fisherman and helps, *and actually touches, on the Sabbath*, a woman who has a thermometer in her mouth.

LOOK AT VERSES 29-34...

And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed 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.

Jesus leaves the synagogue where a pretty remarkable thing just happened, I mean, it's not everyday that there is an exorcism at church, and where does He go? He goes to Peter's house. Note this: Peter is always present with Jesus. Nothing happens in Mark's gospel in which Peter is not present. Peter is an eyewitness to Jesus, and as we know from church history, Mark was discipled by Peter, so Mark's gospel is an eyewitness testimony to the ministry of Jesus.

So Jesus goes to the home of Peter, with these 4 disciples, to get away from the crowds, and He performs another miracle, out of the spotlight, no cameras around, no news reporters. There's just one family and a few friends... *and a need*. And Jesus intervenes, without an iPhone, without his *Instagram* account open, with no desire to immediately post something. He actually sees a *person*. With a need. With a thermometer in her mouth and lying lifeless on the couch.

Notice what verse 30 says, "*...and immediately they told him about her.*" They came in from the synagogue, Peter's wife probably ran up to Peter and said, "*Mom's got a bad fever. She's not going to be able to cook her famous lasagna for that new rabbi you started following.*" So what does Peter do? "*Hey, Jesus!*" He calls on Jesus. Immediately. Remember, Peter just saw Jesus pull off an exorcism at church. And that's why he runs to Jesus. If Jesus can cast out a demon, he can handle a run of the mill fever. Peter knew that it would not bother Jesus to be interrupted by this seemingly insignificant moment.

Jesus sees and then He touches her. Jesus actually does something that no man, let alone a rabbi, should have done: *He touched a woman!* That should shock us! It would have shocked anyone in Jesus' day because it was against Jewish custom to touch a woman that you were not related to, as well as against custom to touch a sick woman. And Jesus does both. On the Sabbath. And then that woman with the thermometer in her mouth gets up and cooks her famous lasagna for Jesus and the disciples. But that constitutes work on the Sabbath, according to the religious leaders. So these moments of compassion and care for His creation end up becoming things that the religious leaders in Jerusalem will use against Jesus in order to accuse and arrest Him.

This story is reminding us that Jesus cares about all the little details of our lives. He will not turn a deaf ear. His will not ignore you. He comes to you because He cares. This was a private moment, with a few friends, where Jesus shows compassion on Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus invades a rather mundane moment- a woman has a fever- and He heals her. Everybody gets a fever occasionally. A fever is just proof that your body's immune system is fighting an infection. And so Jesus goes and heals this woman in an act of mercy and care and compassion. This healing shows us that there really is nothing too small for Jesus. There is no care of ours that is too small for the King of the universe. There is nothing in our lives- NOTHING- that is too small or insignificant for Jesus.

This is where we all live, right? Fevers. Late nights. Small troubles that feel very weighty. And yet Jesus comes to us! He does not stand back. He cares. He moves out in compassion. He really cares about you right now. This episode in Peter and Andrew's house is supposed to reinforce in your mind the love and care that Jesus has for you. Perhaps some Bible verse comes to mind when you see Jesus here in Capernaum, the village of compassion. For me, it was 2 psalms that popped into my head this week as I worked on this sermon:

Psalms 55:22

Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you...

Psalms 56:8

You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?

Are we really going to entertain the thought that Jesus doesn't care? He keeps track of every tossing, every tear! He's got a journal full of them! Listen, I have been troubled many times throughout my life, almost daily, and I have forgotten about 99% of all the things that I was worried about and that concerned me. And yet Jesus could read them all to you right now! Why? Because He cares! He's got a book full of all of my cares, all of your cares, because He cares!

This seems like a very boring, mundane event, but it wasn't. Boring, mundane situations and moments in our home are more than just boring, mundane situations and moments. They become opportunities for us to be confronted with the healing power of Jesus. They become moments where our little kingdoms of self collide with the kingdom of God. They become moments where the kingdom of God, where the grace of Jesus graciously intrudes and helps to reorient our hearts.

Imagine the crowds gathering at the door of Peter's house. Pushing and shoving to get in. Why? Because they heard about the exorcism at church that morning. Perhaps word got out about Peter's mother-in-law. They knew one thing:

JESUS CARES.

They knew that He was not like the other rabbis and scribes and teachers of the law. They gathered that He cared for them. So they wait until sundown, when the Sabbath officially ended, and they all try to crowd into Peter's house. Notice that they wait until sundown. They don't want to "work" on the Sabbath or break some man-made law that the Pharisees came up with. But what they didn't know about Jesus, was that even if they had showed up at 2:30 in the afternoon, He wouldn't have cared and He still would have healed them. On the Sabbath.

Listen, Jesus doesn't care if you interrupt Him precisely because He cares. Just barge on in to your High Priest, boldly, confidently, and just pour your heart out to Him. Mark wants you to see Jesus and be convinced that He will welcome all who clamor at His door.

We seem to lose sight of the redemptive power and purpose of Jesus in those moments. He desires to enter into our mess and brokenness and family drama and begin transforming us and our homes. And this episode in Peter's home shows us that. It's a glimpse into the heart of Jesus: He cares about all the pain and sorrow and drama that take place in our homes. Parenting issues. Marriage problems. Finances. In-laws. Siblings. Jesus cares about all of it. He doesn't sit back and ignore us, nor is He indifferent. He's not sitting around thinking, "*Can't they just get their act together?*" He cares. And He even cares when someone comes down with an ordinary fever.

So 2 things are always taking place as Jesus heals people and casts out demons in the gospels: He is at the same time confronting and overthrowing the kingdom of darkness as well as being the Good Shepherd. It isn't that Jesus just wants to defeat the devil and throw it in his face. And it isn't that Jesus just wants to heal and comfort people. He wants to do both and He does both at the same time: He confronts evil and He comforts people. That's what He does when He intervenes in our lives. He confronts evil and He comforts people. At the same time. He overthrows the kingdom of darkness *as the Good Shepherd*.

So this incident with Peter and his mother-in-law gives us a glimpse into the shepherding heart of Jesus: the joys and sorrows of our homes are not a hindrance to Him, in fact, they are a joy to Him. He loves to enter into the joys and sorrows of our family life and do His thing.

Does Jesus always heal as we wish? No. Sometimes people don't recover. Sometimes things don't go as we want. But we know that when we pray, when we ask for help, for healing, we are not petitioning an angry judge but a caring Father. We are asking the Good Shepherd to help. And He is good and He always does good because He knows what is best for His children. Sometimes, we experience healing like Peter's mother-in-law, and sometimes we get grace to endure.

Commenting on this episode here in Mark, Charles Spurgeon said, "*The tender heart of Jesus waits to hear our griefs, let us pour them into His patient ear.*"

That's what the people in these episodes are doing. They show up at Peter's house, and wait in line, and they pour their griefs in Jesus' patient ear. Let me ask you this morning: What griefs do you need to pour

into Jesus's ear? What is weighing down on your heart, right now? The tender heart of Jesus is waiting. Go ahead and pour all of your troubles, no matter how big or small, into the patient ear of Jesus.

Do you really believe that He cares? He does. If you're struggling to believe that, just tell Him. He can handle it. Tell Him that you doubt. Jesus can handle that. He already knows it, right?! You won't surprise Him with your doubts or struggles.

Where has the brokenness of this world landed on you recently? Where have you felt the effects of Adam's sin, the effects of the Fall? Where are you struggling? Pain. Sorrow. Sadness. It might be physical. It may be the diagnosis that you just received. It might be depression, mental illness. It might be a wayward child. Where are you wounded? Where does it hurt? Where are you injured? How has the brokenness of this world landed on you recently? How is your heart breaking this morning? That's exactly where Jesus wants to meet you. Right in the middle of the living room of your doubt. Right in the middle of the sanctuary of your pain.

And He wants to meet you here today as we celebrate communion. Mark wants us to feel it in our bones that Jesus cares. The Lord's Supper is all the proof that you need. What do these 2 elements tell us? What do the bread and the cup remind us? 2 words-

JESUS CARES.

"The Action of Grace in Territory Held Largely by the Devil"

Mark 1:21-34

Sermon Study Questions

1. Where has the brokenness of this world landed on you recently? What promises of God deal with your situation?
2. Why did Jesus choose to go to Capernaum to start His ministry? What clue does this village give us as to the nature of Jesus' ministry? What was Jesus teaching His disciples about ministry?
3. Read Psalm 56:8. Describe who Jesus is and what He is like from this passage. Do you truly believe that Jesus cares about you, right now, and that He cares about all that you are going through? How can you get your heart to believe and rest in this truth?

4. Quotes to discuss:

Flannery O'Connor

"Often the nature of grace can be made plain only by describing its absence."

Zack Eswine

"Jesus is fame-shy."

Charles Spurgeon

"The tender heart of Jesus waits to hear our griefs, let us pour them into His patient ear."