

Sermon for 2/7/21

Isaiah 40:21-31

Psalm 147:1-11

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

AN ORDINARY MIRACLE

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Finding the natural in the supernatural.

Someone asked me a few nights ago what I'd been up to that day, and I told the truth, that I'd done some deskwork in the morning, then gone to the gym and run some errands in town, and that I'd watched a movie in the afternoon. That was my day. Four things altogether, right?

Wrong. Because the reality is that I did thousands of other things that day. Right from the beginning, after I woke up, I turned on the bedroom light, checked the time, got out of bed, stretched, glanced out the window, patted the dog, brushed my teeth, got dressed, walked down 16 steps to the ground floor, bumped my toe on a bookshelf, turned on the kitchen light, turned on the Weather Channel, stretched again, took the four steps across the kitchen, reached out and turned on the coffee pot. All that in the first five minutes of the day!

And if you think about it, you realize that every single minute of every day is just as full of experience and activity as every other minute. It's interesting to think about how and why, out of the nearly inconceivable number of things we do every day, we somehow organize and shape them into categories, and give them a hierarchy of importance both in our private reflection and in our communication with others. We all engage in this process every day without thinking about it much.

But when you're a writer, either of fiction or nonfiction, you think about it a lot, because you want to describe those actions and events that get to the heart of the reason you're writing.

And that brings us to a section in the gospel of Mark that basically describes the events of one full day in this very beginning of Christ's ministry. Obviously there were many days, but Mark describes in detail this one particular day, and clearly his reason for doing that is that he wants to let the events of this one day be representative of the events of those other days. And so it behooves us to think about them with that in mind – not simply as biographical incidents – like me brushing my teeth – but as events that contain within themselves significance. And as readers of the living word, it always bears fruit to think about what is recorded there, and let it speak to our heart.

We heard last week about the first event of that day. It was a Sabbath – that is a Saturday – and we found Jesus impressing people as a guest speaker at a local synagogue in Capernaum, and then further amazing his audience by exorcising an unclean spirit from a man by a single word of command. Sheryl led us in thinking about that last week, but as we read this week, that was only the beginning of the day.

So let's read now about the rest of that day: Mark 1: 29 – 39.

Let's use our time to think about the first of those events. The morning preaching in the synagogue has concluded, and Peter and Andrew bring Jesus, along with James and John, to their home, presumably to have lunch and wind down. But Peter's mother-in-law is lying in bed with a fever, so they immediately tell Jesus about her. Whereupon Jesus simply takes her by the hand and the fever leaves her, after which she gets up and serves them lunch.

What a simple story! Out of all the things Jesus did that day, why would Mark make a record of this one? Well, let's look at what this story can teach us, and maybe that will tell us why Mark even mentions it.

First of all, we find five hungry young men getting together after what would certainly have been an emotionally strenuous few hours doing what you might expect any young folks to do: go home and eat. And doesn't this remind us of something we're prone to forget, that these were real people,

with real lives with real needs and problems. Archaeology has uncovered the remains of a house many believe to be Peter's in Capernaum, but even if it wasn't his, it was typical of what his house would have been like. And it's very simple: three rooms with a little central hall. Yet here we find Peter and his wife living, along with his wife's mother and who knows how many children. We find Andrew, the older bachelor brother, living with them, and probably a little embarrassed to be living with his little brother. James and John have left their own families, and for all we know may have been staying with Peter, too! And now the sick mother-in-law!

When we read about all the miracles in the Gospel accounts, what we must remember is that the Gospel writers *include* all those miracles precisely *because* Jesus was so fully and completely human. Their difficulty was to convince people that he was something radically different from a man, because that's what he so obviously and emphatically *was*: a man.

And so right here at the beginning, we find a reminder in this homely little domestic episode, of our Lord's humanity. Jesus was a man, a 30 year-old man, hungry and energized by his morning's work, coming to the home of one of his friends for lunch.

Another thing of interest in this account is how Peter and Andrew, on discovering their relative is sick, turn immediately to Jesus and ask if there's anything he can do. We remember that they have only known Jesus for a brief time, and yet already they view him as their first recourse when confronted with a difficult situation.

And isn't there a lesson in that for us, a lesson Mark no doubt intended when he wrote the account. No matter how long or how short our acquaintance with Christ has been, we are to look to him first and foremost to deal with our problems. Jesus certainly does ask us to use him. Remember in John's gospel where we learn that Jesus deliberately washed his disciples' feet, and when Peter tried to protest, Jesus tells him: "Unless I wash your feet, you have no part of me." And elsewhere, Jesus says: "I came to serve, not to be served."

So yes, he wants us to take from him, to use him, but this little episode teaches us that he expects to be used, not as a last resort, but as a first resort. All too often in life, we are like swimmers caught in an undertow, who use up all our strength struggling instead of crying immediately for the

lifeguard. "Oh what peace we often forfeit, Oh what needless pain we bear," as the old hymn teaches us, because we don't Take it to the Lord in Prayer.

And what's also instructional in Mark's account is the way he describes Christ's response to this early evidence of confidence on the part of his new disciples. Of all the miracle accounts in all the Gospels, this is certainly the one involving the least fuss. Let me read it again"

1:30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once.

1:31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

No, back and forth, no words of command, to laying on of hands or interrogation about her faith. No nothing at all! He came over and took her by the hand and lifted her up. That's it.

What's really striking here is the simplicity and naturalness of it all. There's no audience for it as there had been that morning in the synagogue; it's a private setting in a small home concerning a daily trouble. And Jesus simply responds to the situation by providing what's needed, without hesitation, as if offering his aid is as natural as breathing.

And shouldn't some of us be a little embarrassed by that when we think how conflicted we ourselves sometimes become when someone asks us for help? How often do we have to put the pleas for assistance on one side of the scale, and then start adding all the other factors on the other: I'm tired; would this person do the same for me?; I'll be late for my appointment; I really need to conserve my time and energy for someone who might need me even more. And so on and so on.

But with Jesus, there's no hesitation, no theatricality, no fuss. He sees a need and responds, as natural as breathing in and out. And isn't that a model of character to which we could all aspire?

And finally, let's reflect a moment on the woman herself, the mother-in-law. She was no doubt a widow without sons, because she was forced to live with her daughter and son-in-law, and that itself may have lowered her self-respect. Peter and Andrew would probably have told her before they left for

the synagogue early that morning that they would be bringing their new friends home for lunch, including their young teacher and leader, Jesus from Nazareth. The mother-in-law, indebted to Peter for her support, must have felt a serious responsibility to do her part in preparing for their visit.

And yet she had suddenly come down with a violent fever, something which by the way happened frequently and still does today in that part of the world. She's so weak, she can't even get out of bed. Imagine the guilt and shame she must have felt.

And then this young rabbi comes in, sizes up the situation, comes over and without any fuss or to-do, takes her hand, and the fever is immediately gone.

And what does the mother-in-law do then? Does she cry for joy, fall to her knees in gratitude? No. Mark says, simply, she got up and served them.

And isn't that another important lesson hidden in this simple story? As soon as her own needs are attended to by Jesus, she begins to attend to the needs of others.

So often in life, when we've had difficulties and prayed to come through them, once we actually do come through them, we consider the whole issue over and done with. At most, we might offer up a word of thanks to God.

But that's not how heaven's economy works. The heavenly rule is, receive, that you may give. Pay it forward.

Remember the parable of the rich farmer who stored away all his wealth in barns? The moral of that parable is not: You can't take it with you. The deep moral is that, although he thought himself rich, he was actually poor.

Heaven is not the world; it is in many ways the opposite of the world. In heaven, you become richer by giving away.

Does that make sense? Not in human terms. But we must always remember what Paul teaches: For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. The farmer in the parable, had he emptied his barns and given all his

grain to feed the hungry, would not have received even bigger barns with more grain in heaven.

What then would he have received?

I'm afraid we'll have to wait until we get there to find out. But in the meantime, we can find assurance in something else Paul wrote: *Eye has not seen not ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for those who love him.*

But to return to our mother-in-law. She provides a perfect illustration of the point. She receives from Jesus, and immediately gives it away in service to others, with no fuss, no ostentation, no hesitation.

And so let that be our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, not that we may be given health, but that we be given health as an opportunity to help others, not that we may be given strength, but that we be given strength to accomplish Your purposes, not that we may receive blessings, but that we may be conduits for distributing your blessings to your world, because that's what Jesus does, and we pray in his name.