

February 4, 2018
Mark 1:29-39
 The Tipping Point
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²⁹ 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. *The words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Bless us Oh Lord that we may come to your word this morning with hungry eyes and open hearts. We pray in Christ's name, amen.*

Chitlins. Pig intestines. How many of you here will admit to having eaten such a thing? My mom and dad came from farming communities so I have to add myself to those of you who raised their hands. For most of us who have had this experience, we generally keep such things to ourselves when we move out into the broader world.

So it came as quite a surprise when I discovered recently that Chitlins were making cash for a woman named Shauna Anderson. She had this idea that there were large pockets of people in the Washington, D.C., area, many from the South, who grew up eating chitlins. These people actually missed eating them – *and* because it was usually their grandparents who fixed them, *they* didn't know how to cook them.

So, Anderson quit her high level government job and opened the Chitlin Market, selling hand-cleaned raw chitlins in 10-pound buckets. The operation started in Mount Rainier, Maryland, and grew so fast she had to move it to a larger storefront in Hyattsville, Maryland. In the mid 2000's, she reached, what is known in the business world as the "tipping point" and converted to an Internet-only business, www.chitlinsbyshauna.com.

The tipping point – it is that point when a business that has been struggling, suddenly takes off and even the most diligent of business owners or managers have difficulty keeping up with it. At the tipping point, suddenly the product sort of takes on a life of its own.

What is intriguing to marketers and sociologists is what causes, or pushes, something to suddenly take off. For instance, how is it that a movie like Jordan Peele's "Get Out," a film about a black man whose first meeting with his white girlfriend's parents turns into a disturbing nightmare,

after its theatrical release last February, has *everyone* talking about the movie and praising it for its social satire. The critically acclaimed film, which is impossible to categorize, achieved a 99 percent fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes and brought in \$253 million at the worldwide box office, despite only having a production budget of \$4.5 million.

How does stuff like that happen? How does a dorky game like Pokémon make it big among kids? How does a novel become an overnight best seller? How does something that only a handful of people knew about a year ago become a phenomenon that everyone wants to claim as their own today?

Malcolm Gladwell addresses questions like these in his book, *The Tipping Point*, an exploration of the moment when an idea, a product, a social behavior catches on, takes off - “tips” - and becomes something big. He gives several reasons that can explain how this happens.

It is a combination of complex things – really taking the time to know intimately the community you are trying to reach, then putting forth the energy to reach out to them with their wants, needs and desires in mind. And where their needs and desires meet the gifts you have to offer, you are able to find that joyful “tipping point.”

Our morning text from Mark suggests that there are *spiritual* tipping points in our lives – places where our gifts for ministry meet the deep unmet needs of the *souls* of those around us. In fact, Mark suggests some things that might bring *us* to this point.

As we look at our text, what happens first is clear. Jesus “lifts up” Peter’s mother-in-law and restores her to health. The experience of the people in that community was that God moved powerfully to give a kind of hope that was not possible before. It re-centered people to a point outside their own petty concerns and called them in a new way. Well, the whole town was at Peter’s house by nightfall, including the sick and demon-possessed. So a spiritual tipping point begins when *we* begin to recognize God’s powerful movement among us – no matter how big or small – in a new way.

It would stand to reason, then that we should be constantly seeking to put ourselves in a position to be touched by a new and different experience of God.

And how do we do *that*?

With an Active Faith that consciously, intentionally seeks the living God in those places where there is great unmet need. Like a market for chitlins, such places almost always seem unlikely for experiencing God’s presence. Who, after all, living at the time of Jesus would have thought that such a place would have been Capernaum – the home of Peter’s wife’s family?

When I visited Israel in 2007, Capernaum was one of our first stops. It was an extremely modest, *very* tiny village – the most unlikely place for the son of God to begin a ministry that you would ever want to see. The way my imagination had pictured that place and the reality of it were in stark contrast. Yet after he healed Peter’s mother-in-law it became a kind of home base for Jesus. Those who desired the touch of God most came there.

Well, so overwhelmed was Jesus with the spiritual tipping point that his little healing caused in Capernaum that he had to tamp down overt expressions of devotion from those who came having heard he was the messiah. And from there on out, this tamping down theme plays prominently in Mark.

Like all tipping points, his ministry begins to get away from him. It's why, in today's lesson, Mark says Jesus kept the demons he was exorcising from saying who he was. Later, when Peter exclaims that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of the Living God, instead of encouraging him to share it, Jesus will command that his disciples tell no one. He does the same after healing the Gerasene demoniac.

Most scholars say that the reason for this "hidden messiah" theme in Mark was that for him, the central point of meaning regarding Jesus' identity was his death on the cross. From Mark's perspective, Jesus didn't want the word to get out that he was the long awaited messiah because they could not possibly understand the full meaning of that until they had witnessed the darkness of the cross.

In other words, not until the experience of the cross, could people begin to understand what it *really* meant to be Son of God and therefore a disciple of Christ.

So it could be said that a new experience of God – one that leads to a kind of spiritual tipping point is most often born out of a previously understood insignificant or dark place – like Capernaum or the cross. Which leads to a question – where might your Capernaum, your cross *be* right now?

It is no accident that besides the disciples whom Jesus specifically called as part of his original 12, it is among the broken, the infirm, the blind, the lame, the marginalized - that the kingdom of God is first felt. And, as Jesus begins his ministry it is, in fact, the people's *experience* of darkness transformed by light that is the real key; not a sensationalizing of Jesus' identity as some all-powerful Messiah. Fads come and go but a taste for chitlins is for life. Political power is fleeting but the power of *a God willing to suffer for the love of humanity is eternal.*

Jesus repeatedly tells the recipients of his healing that it is their faith that has made them whole. It is Faith, faith that it willing to act that brings us to where God wants us to be. Such an active inner faith founded on the experience of having found God in the dark, has been the force behind every new and worthy change since the birth of Jesus – from new hospitals, primary schools and universities built in remote places to great works of art, great music, and the advent of science.

It is an active faith, for instance, that was behind Thomas Edison's one thousandth try at creating a workable light bulb.

When a reporter asked him, "How did it feel to fail 1,000 times?" Edison replied, "I didn't fail 1,000 times. The light bulb was just an invention with 1,000 steps."

It is an active faith that was behind mother Teresa's lonely move to Calcutta to care for the greatest suffering on the planet – a faith that day in and day out began to attract others to the

ministry until one day there were so many who wanted to become Sisters of Mercy that they had to expand to other places in the world.

According to an ancient ode to the stonecutter, it is not the 100th blow that splits the rock but all 99 that went before: Faith enables one to stay at the hammering in the darkness until one arrives at the experience that one originally felt called to seek. It enables one to stick with it until the rocks of adversity are fashioned into monuments of meaning.

So, what is it that brings one to one's spiritual tipping point? *An active faith that is out there risking it all in places that appear insignificant and dark to everyone else. In other words, what brings one to a tipping point is an active faith that is "edgy".*

But that points to a problem we face today – one of "edge loss." Comfort-seeking edge loss is a genuine 21st century human problem. And those of us advancing in years understand about the edge to comfort ratio. We have a tendency to tip "back" into edge *loss* rather than tip "forward" into keeping our edge. We look more to find comfort in the rituals of our religion than, like the prophetess Anna to continue to find ways to look with our own eyes on the messiah.

You remember Anna. She had been looking with hope for the promised messiah all her life. She was eighty-four but still full of edgy faith when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the temple for his presentation to the priest for circumcision. And because of that she was able to praise God for she was able to see the messiah with her own eyes.

Whether young *or* old, we all face the problem of losing our spiritual edge. But an active faith continues to sharpen that edge – no matter what our age.

And our text suggests that there is a something else that helps us reach our tipping point: *active* prayer. And, again, I want to make *active* the optimum word here. Because it is *active* faith that lifts us up and brings us where we need to be in order to experience God anew and it is *active* prayer that keeps us going.

Part of active seeking involves active removal alone in prayer, in study, in meditation.

Our text tells us that Jesus certainly felt the need to pray. The morning after the tumultuous experience at the home of Peter's nameless mother-in-law, Jesus goes off to a secluded place to pray. This tells me that if Jesus felt the need, we certainly also need to pray.

If ever there was a man who we know reached his tipping point in this lifetime, it is Martin Luther King Jr. And in his autobiography, he writes: "Throughout this struggle for racial justice I have constantly asked God to remove all bitterness from my heart and to give me the strength and courage to face any disaster that came my way. This constant prayer life and feeling of dependence on God have given me the feeling that I have divine companionship in the struggle. I know no other way to explain it. It is the fact that in the midst of external tension, God can give an inner peace."

But when we reach that tipping point, when life takes off for us unexpectedly out of nothing or out of the dark, we humans have a tendency to forget God and want to get on with all the work that we see is at hand. The disciples did this. At Capernaum, they had now reached a tipping point. They had more people than they had ever dreamed wanting to be a part of Jesus' ministry and mission. So they expected him to be on hand to feed the frenzy. He wasn't. And where was he? In prayer.

When the disciples finally found him, they said with exasperation: "Everyone is searching for you!"

Jesus, however, was determined to pray. He must have been determined, because his prayer ritual included three rather inconvenient things: 1. getting up early "while it was still dark," 2. leaving the house and 3. finding a "solitary place." Arising early, leaving and finding – three secrets to a fruitful prayer life.

We use this tri-fold methodology all the time for the things that are really important to us – which most often is not our spiritual lives.

For instance, every day, golfers get up early, leave the house and find themselves on the first tee at the crack of dawn.

Joggers get up "while it is still dark," leave the house before going to work and find a route to run - trying to stay fit.

Students get up early, leave the house and find a classroom in which to learn.

Television personalities get up early, leave the house, and find themselves in front of the camera at 6 a.m.

Wall Street stockbrokers get up early, catch the train and find themselves on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange for the opening bell.

Drum majors crawl out of bed "while it is still dark," leave the house and find themselves on the football field practicing with the marching band.

Carpenters arise early, pack a lunch and are framing a house in the cool hours of the early morning.

Mountain climbers roll out of their sleeping bags at 3 a.m., slap on their crampons and grab a protein bar and find themselves on the ridge of a glacier before the sun is up in the east.

Bakers are up hours before dawn, leave the house and find themselves sliding trays of dough into the oven before the early morning crowd is at the door demanding fresh bread or donuts.

And we Christians? We may get up early, we may even leave the house, but how many of us find a solitary place to pray – like Jesus?

Jesus came to Peter's house and healed one woman and then left to pray. In that healing and in that prayer, we see the pattern of discipleship – of love and life, of rising and thriving. It may not seem like much, but this mustard-seeding type of faithfully acting and praying is the secret of letting the small outwit and tip over the large, of a David having his way with a Goliath, of a government worker finding a higher calling selling pig guts. In these times of Goliath problems that is very good news. So, where is your Capernaum?

Let us pray. Gracious God, afflict our desire for comfort with an active, edgy faith that is willing to go where it is risky and once we have experienced you anew, help us remain equipped for the journey by having an active prayer life.

And now bless these gifts that they may serve you and your kingdom in unexpected ways through your Son Jesus, amen.

*The original idea for this sermon came from Homiletics magazine February 9, 2003 issue.