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Binding Up the Wounds

Mark 1:41

On November 30, 1859, Abraham Lincoln became the first presidential candidate to campaign in Kansas, fourteen months before the territory became a state. Lincoln crossed the state of Missouri on the train which ran from Hannibal to St. Joseph. From St. Joseph Lincoln crossed the river into Kansas and traveled by horse and buggy to deliver speeches in several small towns and the larger communities of Atchison and Leavenworth.

Lincoln's decision to travel to Kansas at a time when college basketball had not even been invented is a bit perplexing. There were not that many votes to be won in this sparsely populated territory. Historians believe that Lincoln was using his speeches in Kansas to develop the themes that he would later use to good effect in his famous Cooper Union Address in New York City. But he did not have to go to Kansas to do that. He had many other options for practicing campaign speeches.

I suspect that Lincoln's decision to go to Kansas had to do with Kansas' role as the battleground between proslavery and antislavery forces. When the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the people of these territories were given the responsibility to decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. The bloodshed that followed helped ignite the passions that would explode in the Civil War. When Lincoln spoke in Atchison he was in a town that was founded in 1855 by proslavery settlers from Missouri. They named the town for David R. Atchison, the proslavery Senator from Missouri. It was the location of frequent border skirmishes until the antislavery forces gained the upper hand in 1857.¹ When Lincoln addressed the 350 people who filled the Methodist Church in Atchison the audience would have included both proslavery and antislavery citizens. I believe that Lincoln went to Kansas because it was literally "bleeding Kansas." Lincoln understood the symbolism of the struggle that was going on there. He wanted to touch the pain of this wounded place.

A similar dynamic is at work in the first chapter of Mark's gospel. There we read that Jesus is just beginning his ministry. He has made the surprising decision to take a preaching tour through the towns of the backwater region of Galilee. At one stop Jesus is approached by a leper who asks to be made clean. In that society the fear of leprosy meant that people with a variety of skin diseases were declared to be lepers and then branded as outcasts. They were not permitted to participate in business or to worship in the synagogue. They were separated from their families and forced to live as beggars. The words spoken by the leper to Jesus underline the condition of lepers as social outcasts. He says, "If you choose, you can make me clean (Mark 1:40)." The leper understands that if Jesus chooses to get involved with him, he will be breaking the social taboo which forbids social interaction with lepers. Jesus' decision to help the leper would be a clear repudiation of a social system which brands some people as inferior and denies them basic human dignity.

Mark tells us that Jesus is moved by compassion and stretches out his hand to touch the leper. By so doing he touches not only the disease of the leper but also the far deeper wounds of social

rejection. The compassion that is at the heart of Jesus' touch has the power to transform the life of the one who receives it.

We know that Abraham Lincoln understood the power of compassion because he emphasized it in a speech given at Second Presbyterian Church on February 22, 1842. This speech was delivered to the Washington Temperance Society which was meeting at Second Presbyterian about fourteen months after Lincoln's celebrated jump from the church window. It was a speech in which Lincoln challenged the Temperance Society to take seriously the pain of the people they were seeking to help. That of course meant not branding drunkards as outcasts. Between the lines of this speech we can also see Lincoln's conviction that mixing religion and politics to force the movement's vision on society would prove counterproductive. Lincoln said:

When the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, persuasion, kind, unassuming persuasion, should ever be adopted. It is an old and a true maxim, that a "drop of honey catches more flies than a gallon of gall." So with men. If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend. Therein is a drop of honey that catches his heart, which, say what he will, is the great highroad to his reason, and which, when once gained, you will find but little trouble in convincing his judgment of the justice of your cause, if indeed that cause really be a just one. On the contrary, assume to dictate to his judgment, or to command his action, or to mark him as one to be shunned and despised, and he will retreat within himself, close all the avenues to his head and his heart; and though your cause be naked truth itself... you shall be no more able to pierce him, than to penetrate the hard shell of a tortoise with a rye straw.²

We don't know how Lincoln's speech was received that day. But we can safely assume that he ruffled some feathers. Even as a young man Lincoln recognized that the wounds which run most deep can only be touched by compassion.

By the time Lincoln went to Kansas in 1859, it was clear that the most damaging wounds in American society were those rooted in slavery. The day Lincoln spoke to the gathering at the Methodist Church in Atchison, John Brown was hanged at Charleston for murder and trying to lead a slave rebellion.³ The commitment of Second Presbyterian Church to the cause of abolitionism revealed a willingness to enter the pain of those who were afflicted by this social evil. Clinton Conkling has painted a compelling picture of that pain as it was displayed on the streets of Springfield. He quoted a Second Presbyterian member named James S. Francis who remembered seeing escaped slaves who had been tracked down by sheriffs from Missouri with the help of local authorities. These runaways would be handcuffed and loaded in spring wagons and paraded down Sixth Street on their way back to slavery in Missouri.

The most appalling part of that spectacle according to those who witnessed it was that the people of Springfield did not protest. Most people looked the other way.⁴ The members of Second Presbyterian refused to look away. They believed they were called to enter into the heart of this terrible pain. They did this by participating in the Underground Railroad and by receiving African-Americans Jamieson and Elizabeth Jenkins into the membership.

They also refused to be part of the slave economy. We find an example of what that entailed in Session minutes from 1843. A member of the church was cited to appear before the Session, to answer charges concerning non-attendance in worship and "purchasing or dealing in human beings." When this member declared that he had no intention of ever discussing his business dealings with the Session

he was excommunicated. The language of the minutes in this case is unusually revealing. It says they had to act because “the scandal on the church” was so great.⁵

They had heard the plea of the outcast and they knew how God wanted them to respond. They confronted the pain and stood ready to bind up the wounds. We are called to live by that compassion.⁶

Endnotes

1. Robert Wuthnow, “Lincoln in Kansas.”
2. Lincoln’s Temperance Address at Second Presbyterian, 22 February 1842.
3. Robert Wuthnow, “Lincoln in Kansas.”
4. Clinton Conkling, 1910 *History of Second Presbyterian Church* and 1916 letter to Mr. Gunter.
5. Second Presbyterian Church Session Minutes, 9 August and 30 August 1843.
6. I am indebted to Robert Wuthnow for sharing with me his well researched essay, “Lincoln in Kansas,” soon to be published as a chapter in his forthcoming book *Red State Religion*. Wuthnow’s essay, however, does not pose the question of why Lincoln decided to go to Kansas. My answer to that question is my own historical speculation.