Sermon 09-09-18

The Healer at Work

Mark 7:24-37

Have you ever thought about the healing stories of Jesus? When we read some of them it seems that the New Testament stories of Jesus healing people are just too simple. Have you ever thought that just perhaps … maybe the gospel writers — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — could have given us a little more details.

Nowadays, we know Jesus is the Son of God. But it appears that Jesus needed only to speak a word and the person was well, and even sometimes he did nothing more than to touch the person. In fact, we even read in one story, a woman who needed healing only reached out and touched Jesus — and not even Jesus himself; just the fringe of his robe.

Well, if you have been one who wants a bit more detail, today you are in luck. Today’s lesson offers a little more. We may find some of the details earthier than our 21st-century, antiseptic taste desires, but of course, that’s the price of asking for a fuller, more authentic report. That is, there’s always a chance we’ll get more than we really want.

**A summary of the story**

In our reading this morning we heard two healing stories about Jesus. Today I would like to focus on the second story. Jesus and his disciples rarely went outside Palestine, but on this occasion, they had been in Tyre, then went through Sidon and down to the region of the Decapolis as they were returning to Galilee. We hear about these places but never think twice about them because we are not familiar with the geography. Well, it’s time for a quick lesson.

**GRAPHIC: For Jesus to go from Tyre, through Sidon and then down to the region of the Decapolis to return to Galilee is like us going from Philadelphia to Atlanta, by way of New York.** Now, if you are flying like we do today, that’s no big deal; by car maybe a little bit longer. But when you are walking, as they did in Jesus time, that’s a different story. Some scholars estimate that it took Jesus and the disciples about 8 months to make this trek.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Graphic: We are told somebody — we aren’t told who — brought to Jesus a deaf man, who also had “an impediment in his speech.”** Notice scripture doesn’t say he was a deaf-mute; he could speak but had an impediment. This second affliction isn’t surprising, of course, because if one is deaf, one must learn sounds without hearing them — whether from other people or from one’s own voice. The people who brought the man “begged” Jesus “to lay his hand” on him.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We should, of course, thank God for the kind of friends who help others when they’re in need, whether by bringing the proverbial covered dish, by encouraging them to seek help, or by taking a person to the place of help.

In this story, we’re about to see Jesus perform a miracle; but mark you, there would have been no miracle if it hadn’t been for these anonymous persons who brought the impaired individual to Jesus. The deaf man was likely afraid to approach Jesus, since it was so difficult for him to speak. Perhaps he had become something of a recluse. So, we should be glad for heaven’s accomplices to miracles: the people who help out in sometimes small and unspectacular ways, but in ways that open the door for great things to happen.

**GRAPHIC: These friendly helpers asked Jesus to touch the man. They had heard, or perhaps had seen, how easily Jesus seemed to confront hopeless cases**. But now watch the Great Physician at work. The Bible tells us that Jesus took the man “aside in private, away from the crowd.” What a lovely, sensitive thing to do! Crowds are a problem to this man, with his difficulty in communicating. It seems to him that people are all gesturing and moving their lips and carrying on in exaggerated ways, and because of his deafness, he feels left out, never sure of what’s going on.

**How Jesus begins the healing process**

**GRAPHIC: So, Jesus put the man at ease; he took him alone, away from the crowd**. This is the first step in the miracle of this man’s healing, when Jesus added to the man’s comfort and self-esteem by giving him sensitive, tailor-made attention. Jesus healed the man’s sense of inferiority before he healed his body. In truth, many a sick person needs some emotional healing before medicine or treatments even begin.

**GRAPHIC: Then Jesus put his fingers into the deaf man’s ears. How do you tell a deaf person that you understand where the problem is?** You put your fingers into the ears. But there’s more to this gesture. It was commonly believed in that first-century world that when a person had some physical ailment, it was evidence that they had sinned. When Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears, he was accepting the man at the very point of the man’s sense of rejection. No words could quite have done this. This is our Lord of the Cross, the One who takes upon himself the burdens and sins of others. Here Jesus chooses to *own*what that man saw as his shame.

**GRAPHIC: Now watch. Jesus spits (okay, I won’t really spit), then touches the man’s tongue.** Some think as they read this story that Jesus spit on his finger, then touched the man’s tongue with the spittle, but this isn’t what the Scripture reports. It tells us simply that Jesus “spat.”

In the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture,* I find it interesting the way Ephrem the Syrian describes the Touch of the Lord. He wrote:

That power which may not be handled came down and clothed itself in members that may be touched, that the desperate may draw near to him, that in touching his humanity they may discern his divinity. For that speechless man the Lord healed with his fingers of his body. He put his fingers into the man’s ears and touched his tongue. At that moment with fingers that may be touched, he touched the Godhead that may not be touched. Immediately this loosed the string of his tongue and opened the clogged doors of his ears. For the very architect of the body itself and the artificer of all flesh had come personally to him, and with his gentle voice tenderly opened up his obstructed ears. Then his mouth which had been so closed up that it could not give birth to a word, gave birth to praise him who made its barrenness fruitful.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

**The meaning in Jesus’ actions**

**GRAPHIC: In Jesus’ day, people believed that spittle had a curative quality.[[4]](#footnote-4)** Many believed that there was some sort of magic in spittle, but we doubt that. Jesus constantly directed attention to God in all his works, so he would hardly have wanted the deaf man to think that he was simply another village magician. More likely, by spitting in the presence of the man who had an impediment in his speech, Jesus was saying, dramatically, “We will spit out this thing that binds your tongue.” That is, Jesus’ act of spitting was a kind of visual sermon. “Is there something in your mouth that prevents you from being all that God intended you to be? Then, spit it out!”

 The writer then tells us that **GRAPHIC: Jesus looked up to heaven and *sighed****.*A sigh is a peculiar form of communication. In our ordinary speech, we often accompany a sigh with a shrug of the shoulders. The dictionary tells us that a sigh is often a sign of weariness or of longing. What was in Jesus’ mind as he “sighed,” while looking up to heaven? Was Jesus weary with the load of human need? Or was Jesus expressing his longing for God’s intervention healing this man? The Great Physician is looking up to heaven while also bearing the sorrow, disappointments and sicknesses of the earth.

And then Jesus spoke. **GRAPHIC: It was a single word in the common speech of the people: “Ephphatha!” (EF uh thuh). For us it is two words, but still succinct and direct and clear enough: “Be opened!”**

Mark tells us that *immediately*the man’s ears were opened, so he could hear, and his “tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.” The report is so clear, so wonderfully forthright. The ears were “opened” — these ears that for so long had been closed**. GRAPHIC: The tongue was “released” — this tongue that, for whatever reasons, had been tied in frustrating knots.** And it happened “immediately”: no series of events, no progressive unfolding, but “immediately.” But then again, everything in Mark happens immediately.

 Let’s pause for a moment on a detail in the story that may have gotten your attention: Jesus then ordered the healed man and his friends to “tell no one.” Yeah, right!

**GRAPHIC: “The more he ordered them the more zealously they proclaimed it.”** How could it have been otherwise? Especially for the man who had been healed? If communication has been painful at best and impossible at worst and you now can speak as eloquently as a Greek dramatist, you’d want to exercise your new power as vigorously as possible, wouldn’t you? And what would you want above all else to talk about? Of course, about your healing, and about the person who did it, and about how he did it. The Rabbi they call Jesus!

Why did Jesus order silence in this and other cases of healing? It was because those who were opposed to him were becoming increasingly agitated, and Jesus wanted to delay his eventual arrest and trial until he had accomplished more of his earthly mission. But it was hard to silence people who had been the beneficiaries or the witnesses of something so dramatic and beautiful.

**A summary of the Great Physician’s method**

See again how Jesus healed the man: He took the man aside, away from the circumstances that exaggerated his problem, and gave him personal, exclusive attention. Then he touched the man at the very place of his problem, of the matter that frustrated and embarrassed him and quite surely imprisoned him. Jesus “owned” the man’s shame by putting his fingers in the man’s ears, then condemned the man’s chains by spitting.

Look at the spirit in which Jesus did all of this: Jesus worked with a sigh, because he took the man’s burden as his own. And then, he looked up to heaven — this was no magic formula; this was a work done with the aid of Jesus’ heavenly Father. Then Jesus commanded, “Be opened!” Jesus was in charge.

We see most vividly that Jesus did not consider this man just another job, another case of healing. He considered him an individual. The man had a special need and a specific problem. With tenderness and consideration Jesus dealt with him in a way that spared his feelings and in a way he could understand. Jesus showed him he had nothing to fear.[[5]](#footnote-5)

So, this morning, let me leave you with these two thoughts. First, if today your life needs a touch of healing — physical, emotional, spiritual — **GRAPHIC: know that Jesus Christ is indeed the Great Physician and that he is sensitive to the complexity of your needs.** This can be a day of inner healing and renewed strength for you.

Second, **GRAPHIC: you can be a person of healing to someone else.** It may be that you will be Christ’s aide, in the fashion of those friends of the deaf man in the gospel lesson. Or you *yourself* can be the healing listener who will give someone a place of emotional security where his or her problem can be heard in privacy, then take on yourself a share of that person’s pain and perhaps even shame until, with a sigh of concern, you can enlist the help of our Lord in heaven. You may have more grace and healing to share than you have ever realized.

**GRAPHIC: So, go in peace — healed, and ready to share healing with others.**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Scripture Reading for Sunday, 09-09-18

Mark 7:24-37

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, 25but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.26Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ 28But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ 29Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ 30So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’ 35And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’

1. William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible, “The Gospel of Mark,”* ©The William Barclay Estate, 1975, 2001 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 208 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lamar Williamson Jr., *Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, “Mark,”* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 138 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas C. Oden & Christopher A. Hall, Gen. Ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, “Mark,”* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 97-98 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Barclay, *“Mark,”* p. 209 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Barclay, *“Mark,”* p. 210 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)