

“Miraculous Listening”

based on Mark 7:24-37

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Sometimes a conversation changes your life. Then it changes someone else's.

Once upon a time, there were two outcasts who, although they were separated by many miles, were joined in their suffering. The one, a mere child in the north country, spent every day as the object of her mother's unwavering attention and commitment, afflicted as she was with things in her mind she could not understand, impulses that made her behave in ways she could not control. The other, in an eastern province, spent every day watching other people go about their daily business but really only knowing half the story of their lives because he could not hear what they were saying. Likely the object of derision, or at least pity, he tried to make his desires and intentions known, but people only looked at him strangely when he did. The lives of both of these outcasts were characterized by the inability of others to understand them, and probably their own inability to understand themselves. They lived in similar worlds of desperation, one with too many voices in her head, and the other with too few.

Something similar may be said about the other two characters in the story, a faith healer who is surrounded by too many voices of desperation, and a woman hearing too few voices of hope. If the the first two characters in this story are

separated by physical distance but joined by suffering, these last two are separated by miles of culture and gender, but linked by being exhausted caregivers. The one is looking for a little rest and relaxation after being needed by so many, while the other is looking for release from being needed so completely by a single person. Each would wish they need not have an encounter with the other, if all were right with the world, but when they do meet, their faith and wits are evenly matched, and a conversation which changed them, changed others as well. Sometimes a conversation changes your life. Then it changes someone else's.

It is not mere coincidence that these two stories, the healings of the syrophenician woman's daughter and the deaf mute man are paired together. At first glance, we might think they are put together simply because they are stories of healing that demonstrate Jesus' power over the things which ail us human beings, over unclean spirits and bodies the parts of which don't always work the way God intended. At second glance, we might see that both of those healed were Gentiles, non-Jews, the first time in the Gospel of Mark such a thing has happened. But while these are true, I think there is more at work here, more that we are meant to hear when reading these stories together. As with most of the miracle stories in the New Testament, for me, the miracle is not the supernatural occurrence, but the grace revealed in the encounter, grace which transforms and impacts the lives of the participants far more profoundly than simply being cured of their infirmities or

delivered from their bondage. That is particularly true in these two stories, for the encounter of grace in one leads to the encounter of grace in the other.

I want to suggest to you tonight that Jesus' conversation with the woman in the region of Tyre, Gentile territory, is the catalyst for the deaf mute man's healing in one of the cities of the Decapolis, another part of Gentile territory, and that in a sense, her words are the Gospel in his newly opened ears. And if her words of faith have such power to transform even the Son of God, how much more power can and should our words of faith have to transform the world. In this story we see how one conversation changed not only the lives of its own participants, but the lives of people far removed from the time and place of that conversation. The secret to unlocking this relationship between all these characters is found, I think, in the way the story uses the themes of listening, speaking, and hearing, all in the context of faith and compassion.

Presumably, by saying, "Jesus entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there," Mark means to tell us that Jesus has sought a place where he can have a little down time, a little while to reflect, to be silent, to *not* talk to people. Yet this is impossible, for his fame, and he is discovered by a woman desperate for conversation, desperate to tell her story. And while Jesus' response to her is rightly interpreted as a commentary on Jewish/Gentile relations, for the two mixed like water and oil, kept apart like purebreds and mutts, when he says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to

the dogs,” I hear it as much as a witty brush off, to simply get rid of her, as a cold hearted rebuke of an uppity outsider. He wants to be alone, and she is disturbing him. If Jesus was human, Jesus was grouchy. This mental picture of a grouchy and ascerbic Jesus may not jive too well with that venerable vision of a gentle and sinless savior, but if Jesus’ humanity is an essential element in our understanding God, we should embrace this flub of Jesus, rather than seek to explain it away. Perhaps Jesus’ perfection is revealed not in our understanding of his once and perpetual sinlessness, but in his ability to not persist in sin. How can Jesus expect us to be open to changing our ways, our perceptions, if he is not willing to change his own? And so though he may have wounded with a slip of the tongue, for an insult is an insult, he was willing to stand corrected in the face of the truth, even truth revealed from an unlikely and unclean source. He may not have been looking for a conversation, but the one that found him changed him and changed others.

You see, Jesus wanted a break from hearing the voices calling out for him. He wanted silence. But hearing is an auditory phenomenon, simply the physical sensation of sound waves breaking into the ears of the receiver. Listening, however, is another matter. Listening involves hearing, yes, but listening means giving attention to what you are hearing, transforming it from noise and science to communication and relationship. Miraculously, Jesus listened to the Word of God spoken by a Gentile woman, and the sounds, the noise, the hearing he wanted to escape, were transformed into an experience of grace that healed not only a girl

afflicted by unclean spirits, but another man far away who had no choice but to avoid hearing, and who had no opportunity to listen or be listened to.

It is often said that to be a good writer, one needs to be a good reader, that is, one needs to read material that teaches good and proper use of language, that expands the vocabulary, that opens the imagination, etc. Monkey see, monkey do, right? The same thing is true of speech. Why do you suppose we have such a human thing as accents? Because people learn to speak as they are spoken to. Our own speech is informed by our hearing, and our relationships are formed by listening. The man in the story was unable to speak clearly because he had never heard clearly. Very likely he was challenged to have authentic and meaningful relationships because he could not listen or be listened to. This is not to say that persons with disabilities cannot communicate or have meaningful relationships, but it is to say that life and social interaction are made more challenging being different, and even more so in a culture which generally viewed persons with disabilities not worthy of celebrating in their own right, but as social liabilities to be at best tolerated, and at worst, scorned. It was not only for every day practicality that this man wanted his ears to work, to experience the noise and science of hearing, but also that he might experience more fully communication and relationship with those in his life, and to be no longer considered useless in the eyes of his community.

Perhaps you can see where this is going. When Jesus stops to listen to the woman, a veritable prophet bringing him the Word of God, his thinking about God's relationship with the Gentiles is transformed. They are no longer to be avoided and insulted, but to be welcomed into the fold as fellow citizens in the kingdom of God, brothers and sisters in the household of the Divine. It is equipped with this new understanding, or at least a reminder of the prophet Isaiah's ancient words that Israel is called to be a light to the nations, that Jesus finds himself once again in Gentile territory confronted with a man in need, in need, ironically of having his ears opened, just as Jesus had his opened. And so when Jesus says, "Ephphatha! Be opened!," it is not just in reference to the deaf man's ears, but it is self-referential in that he has just had himself opened up to a new way of thinking. And for Mark, with these words, he wants his readers to be opened up to what Jesus is teaching through the story, to listen and be transformed, not merely to hear the words and letting them fall to the ground. Maybe this is what James is getting at in our epistle lesson from last week, that being doers of the Word means that we have listened to the Word, and been transformed by it, rather than simply hearing it and moving on with our lives.

To see the depths of Jesus' own transformation, and the transformation to which we are called, we need only look at the difference in the way Jesus treated these two Gentiles. With the woman, he calls her a dog, and dismisses her like one dismisses a dog begging for scraps. But with the deaf mute man, Jesus takes him

aside, away from being a spectacle, away from being the subject of humiliation. Although Mark does not comment on Jesus' motivation for taking the man to a private place, I think it was an act of extraordinary compassion that Jesus addresses the man's issues in private, giving his tongue its own space, so to speak, to loosen up without having to risk being laughed at. And all this is on top of the fact that perhaps if not for his earlier conversation with the woman in Tyre, he might never have dealt with this man, this Gentile who he once might have considered a dog too.

And so we have one story about listening, and another about hearing. Jesus heard a word of truth, and then the man did. In a very real sense, the woman's wit/faith makes the other man's healing possible. He will learn to do what she did; to cry out to God for mercy, for a chance, for grace. The truth she spoke will be the truth he proclaims, because Jesus chose to listen, chose to participate in a conversation discouraged by custom, in the midst of the seeking of silence. The circle is completed when the man hears the Word, and speaks "plainly," the way the woman in Tyre spoke plainly. But it doesn't end there; the story concludes with more and more people speaking the truth, as it says, "the more he ordered them to tell no one, the more zealously they proclaimed it." A ministry to the chosen people becomes a ministry of choosing all people when Jesus listens.

This tells me that our listening has a lot to do with other people's healing. That is to say that as we listen to God or listen to those who are not like us, or even

to those we already know and love, we open ourselves to new ways of knowing God, which changes how we interact with the world. This is one of the guiding principles and practices of the organization that I recently wrote about in the *Emerge*, that group of churches in Central Minnesota that helped the City Council realize that there was no good reason for denying a zoning variance to a black church that wanted to build their first building. The Great River Interfaith Partnership, or GRIP, is a group of churches that has as its mission being a prophetic voice in its area, and using the gifts of the members of these churches to transform inequity and injustice into opportunity and community. But this is not a group that thinks if it simply shouts the loudest, it will get results. On the contrary, it is a group that listens more than it speaks, through a process called One-to-One visitation. These one to ones are a way to deepen the relationships between members of each participating church, to help make connections between the pastors of the churches, to hear what real fears and hopes exist in the community, to invite participation of both citizens and leaders in addressing common community issues. The practice of one to ones requires a great deal of discipline and love, for it can be quite difficult to listen more than you speak, but the effort is transformative. In just a few short years, GRIP has helped to positively address some of the nagging issues in the community, like the lack of affordable housing, racial profiling, and funding for public education, all because people have taken the time to listen to one another.

As we move forward together at ECF, I would suggest we make this type of listening a regular practice. It takes some training to do it effectively, and I hope when the time comes and we offer that training, that you will be open to learning how to do it better. But in the meantime, let me encourage you to simply start by sitting down with someone from this fellowship that you don't know well, or don't know at all, and begin to share your stories together. Maybe you could start at our fellowship dinner tonight! I think you will find, like Jesus and all the characters in the stories we have looked at tonight, that there is more grace than you can imagine in a story shared, in truth spoken in love, in making ourselves open to hearing and listening. May God bless our listening, the opening of our ears, and the transforming words of grace we speak in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.