

“Jesus and the Deaf Man”
Mark 7:31-37
January 12, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

As we have for the last few years between Epiphany and Pentecost – for the first portion of the calendar year – we return this morning to our series in the Gospel of Mark, picking up right where we left off last spring.

At this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is on an extended trip, traveling and ministering deep into Gentile territory. This morning, he comes to the Decapolis, another Gentile region, which he has visited and performed miracles in before. [Edwards, 223-224; Horne, 124]

And so, we turn now to our text: Mark 7:31-37.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

³¹ Then he [that is, Jesus] returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. ³⁴ And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵ And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, as we come to your Word,
along with the psalmist we ask you to teach us the way of your statutes,
that we might keep it to the end.
Give us understanding, that we may follow your word
and observe it with our whole hearts.
Incline our hearts to your testimonies,
and not to our own selfish ends.
Turn our eyes and attention now from frivolous things,

and give us life through your word.
Grant this for Jesus' sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:33-34, 36-37]

Introduction

We have, this morning, a story of healing ... but one with some unique features, along with even more grammatical indications than normal that this account came directly from an eyewitness – likely the Apostle Peter, who would have seen it happen. [Edwards, 224]

And what's especially striking here are the physical actions Jesus carries out before the healing: putting his fingers in the man's ears, spitting, touching his tongue, looking up to heaven.

Now, some readers might come across this account and simply assume that this is just Jesus just doing the rituals of a miracle worker.

But that doesn't actually fit with what we've seen from Jesus so far.

Tim Keller writes: "Remember that in every miracle we have witnessed [in the Gospel of Mark], from calming the storm to bringing Jairus's daughter back to life to the healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter, there was no arm waving, no incantation, no mumbo-jumbo. Jesus obviously does not need to perform a ritual in order to summon his power." [Keller, 100]

Which means that for the healing itself, these actions and gestures of Jesus were not necessary.

So then why did Jesus do them here?

And while there may be more than one answer to that, it was Sinclair Ferguson and Tim Keller who convinced me that the first answer we should consider – the first thing we should see here, is a picture of how Jesus interacts with someone who has been deeply affected by disability.

So that's what we'll consider this morning.

And before anyone starts tuning out, and assuming this sermon isn't for them, I'd urge you to consider that this topic has relevance for all of us.

Some here are affected by disability themselves. Others have someone close to them who's affected by disability. And even if that's not you, if you are a Christian, and a member of this church, or another one, then you have brothers and sisters in Christ with disabilities, and you have an obligation to them, as fellow members of the Body of Christ, that this text speaks to.

And with that, we should remember that disabilities can take many forms.

Some, of course, are physical. They may affect mobility, or the ability to carry out certain activities. They may affect the senses or the ability to communicate in some way – as with the deaf and mute man in our text. But whatever form they take, in addition to their immediate effects, many physical disabilities can also lead to social or relational barriers, when people or groups fail to make accommodations to help those with such disabilities to participate and belong.

Then, in addition to physical disabilities, there are also mental, emotional, and developmental disabilities.

Some conditions in that category are visible to us, like Downes Syndrome or Cerebral Palsy.

But others are only seen in the person's actions or in hearing from them how they experience the world. This can be true with developmental disabilities like autism or ADHD. It's also true of mental disorders like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, or dementia. And then there are mental and emotional disorders like depression and anxiety that can exist on a range of severity from more mild to more severe symptoms.

Each of these disorders can shape how a person experiences the world, how they respond to the world, and how they are able to connect with others. And in some cases, the fact that a disability is not visibly apparent can be an extra burden. David Foster Wallace, for example, has written about the loneliness of something like severe depression, which can be debilitating, and yet no one around that person can see the cause of their symptoms. [Wallace, 696]

In any case, whether physical, mental, emotional, developmental, or degenerative, there are a range of disabilities that we, or people around us, might deal with.

And as we see Jesus interact with a man experiencing disability in our text this morning we'll note four things. We'll see Jesus's connection, Jesus's example, Jesus's grief, and Jesus's healing work.

Jesus's Connection

First, we see Jesus's connection with the deaf and mute man.

Mark notes in verse 33 that Jesus took the man aside, away from the crowd, to interact with him privately.

Tim Keller points out just how significant this was – That Jesus interacts with this man privately, and not in front of a watching crowd.

All his life, this man had likely been treated as a spectacle by others. He was probably mocked for his problems with speech. Jesus would have known this. And Jesus refuses to make a spectacle of him now. Instead, Jesus shows a gentle and sensitive compassion. [Keller, 101]

Instead of using this man to increase his own fame, Jesus takes him aside to focus on him, and him alone, privately ... despite many others in the crowd who would love a private audience with Jesus, but didn't get one. That's how much Jesus cares to connect with this disabled man.

He draws close to him, stands before him, and places his hands on him, lovingly touching him.

But the connection doesn't stop there.

Why does Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears, and spit, and touch the man's tongue, and look upward before healing him?

Sinclair Ferguson explains it like this. First he sets the context: “Picture the scene,” he writes. “A man who is deaf and almost completely dumb is being hurried along by his friends to meet Jesus. Perhaps they are all in such a state of excitement that they have not even explained to their friend what they hope Jesus will do. Excitedly they beg Jesus to heal him.” [Ferguson, 114]

There is a crowd, and there may be a rush, and even confusion. But then Jesus slows everything down, takes the man aside, and carries out these strange actions.

Why?

Well ... the answer is kind of obvious, actually.

Jesus is signing to the man what he intends to do, and how he intends to do it. He’s explaining to the man what’s about to happen to him.

Ferguson writes:

“The man could not hear Jesus and he was also incapable of verbal communication. So Jesus ‘spoke’ to him in the language he could understand – sign-language. The fingers placed in his ears and removed meant, ‘I am going to remove the blockage in your hearing.’ The spitting and the touching of the man’s tongue meant, ‘I am going to remove the blockage in your mouth.’ The glance up to heaven meant, ‘It is God alone who is able to do this for you.’” [Ferguson, 114]

Jesus meets the man where he is ... and where others have perhaps failed to communicate with him, Jesus takes the time, and has the interest and desire to connect with, and communicate with the man, like no one else was doing in this scene. [Lane, 266-267]

It's for this reason that Ferguson comments that “this is one of the most beautiful” of all of Jesus’s miracles. [Ferguson, 114]

It shows us that Jesus desires to, and is able to, connect with and communicate with those with disability – even those whose disability would seem make communication difficult or even impossible.

That was true in his earthly ministry. But it’s also still true today.

By the Holy Spirit, Jesus still draws close to his people. And he is able to come to a person, and comfort them, and enable them to know and trust him, even when others may struggle to connect.

We may not always know how to define exactly what that experience is like for different people ... but we certainly know it’s possible and it’s real.

No disability is stronger than Jesus’s ability to connect with one of his children.

And that has implications.

If you struggle with a disability yourself, and relational difficulties are some part of that (as they were for the deaf man in our text), then you can know that you can go to Jesus, and he really will understand where others have not. He will draw close to you, where others feel distant.

And if you're close to someone with disability, among all the different ways you might be able to serve them and bless them, one very simple thing you can do, is bring them to Jesus. That may mean sharing the gospel with them. It may mean praying with them or for them. It may mean reading Bible stories with them. It may mean bringing them to worship at church. Whatever the details, like the friends of this deaf man in verse 32, we too can bring our friend or loved on to Jesus, and beg Jesus to connect with them.

Because the first thing we see here is Jesus's desire and ability to connect with someone struggling with disability.

Jesus's Example

The second thing we see, is Jesus's example.

To start, Jesus here gives us a striking example for how we are to love a person with disability.

And Jesus does that by treating this man not as a collection of challenges, but as a person, made in God's image, worthy of time, attention, and compassion.

In verse 33 we learn that there was a whole crowd there to see Jesus ... but Jesus took this man aside to spend extra time with him, one-on-one ... because that's what the man needed. Jesus doesn't insist that this man fit into the same box as everyone else, but instead, Jesus adjusts his approach and his efforts to this man's needs. We are often called to do the same ... but we may resist it, and try to insist instead that everyone fit in the same box.

Jesus treats this man differently. But as he does, he also protects him from unwanted attention. He doesn't use him to virtue signal, hoping others will see what he's doing. In fact, it may be for that reason, that we only have this story in one of the four Gospels, coming directly from Peter, one of the few who saw what happened. In a similar way, we are to avoid drawing unwanted attention towards those with disabilities, and we're certainly not to display our efforts toward them as a way to boost our reputation. We are to respect them enough to care more about how others view them than about how others view us for helping them.

In all this – in seeing the man in all his dignity, in taking the extra time and effort to connect with him, in guarding him from unwanted attention, Jesus gives us an example for how we seek to love someone with a disability.

But then, along with that, I think Jesus also gives an example to those who have a disability, for how they respond to those who love them.

I think that when we look at the deaf man's friends ... we see that they did some things well, and some things less well. That they went and got their disabled friend once they heard that Jesus was in town, that they brought him to Jesus, and that, we're told in verse 32, they begged Jesus to attend to him – these are all beautiful signs of their love and labor for their disabled friend or family member.

But as Sinclair Ferguson seems to suggest ... implicit in Jesus's making signs to the deaf man ... is the idea that his friends didn't do a very good job explaining to the man what was going on. He

was probably confused. Maybe he was scared. The friends may have dropped the ball in some ways.

But Jesus doesn't rebuke them. Instead, he focuses on the good they have sought to do, and he honors that.

Our love in this world is always imperfect. It always falls short. And as Christians we are always called to try to do better. But as Christians, when others love us imperfectly, we are also called to be gracious towards their imperfect efforts, and to receive the good they intend in it all. Jesus models that for us here – in graciously receiving the efforts of the man's friends, rather than correcting them for where they fell short.

And if you struggle with disability ... then as you experience the imperfect efforts of others trying to show you love ... you are called to the same. You are called to be gracious towards those who love you ... but who regularly do so imperfectly.

Now, that doesn't mean you don't lovingly explain to them how they can grow in relating to you better. It just means that you also make an effort to see the good they are trying to do, see the love behind it, and respond graciously to their shortcomings ... just as Jesus does here.

For both those loving someone with a disability, and for those with a disability, Jesus provides for us all an example to follow.

That's the second thing we see here.

Jesus's Grief

The third thing we see, is Jesus's grief.

And this isn't apparent at first ... but it is there.

It comes up in the first half of verse 34, where we read that between connecting with the man, and healing the man, Jesus "sighed."

Now ... as commentators point out, the Greek might better be translated as "he groaned" or "he moaned." The term can be used for an expression of pain. [Keller, 101; Wright, 97] And it appears to reflect Jesus's emotional engagement in the man's suffering. [Bayer, 1908; France 303-304; Lane 266-267]

Even though Jesus knew that God was good ... even though he trusted perfectly that God was working all things for the good of his people ... even though Jesus knew God's healing power and that he was about to heal this particular man in just a moment ... even so, Jesus here let's out what appears to be an expression of grief. [Ferguson, 115]

There's a place for grief, in the face of brokenness and disability. And that's not just a concession, but a healthy expression of faith, since Jesus himself seems to express it here.

As was the case at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus's perfect faith and his plans for healing in no way contradict his grief over seeing others suffer the brokenness of this world.

And that has serious implications.

It means, for those with a disability, that there's an appropriate, and even important, place for grieving ... over what's been lost ... over the struggle ... over how the brokenness of this world has affected you personally.

Jesus grieves over such things. And you can too.

Don't try to be too spiritual to grieve. Jesus here, wasn't too spiritual to grieve. And as C.S. Lewis reminds us, if we're trying to be more spiritual than Jesus ... then somewhere along the line we've gotten off on the wrong track.

For those struggling with disability themselves, there is a place for grief.

But along with that, and sometimes less noted, there is also space for grief for those close to someone with disability as well.

That is, in a sense, what we see with Jesus here.

Now ... that kind of grief is not a grief over who the disabled person is. It's not a wish that they were someone different.

But it is grief over how some aspect of the brokenness of this world, due to the fall, has led to loss.

It may be grief over how that brokenness has affected someone you love. Or it may be grief over how that brokenness has affected your relationship with them. Or it may be grief over how that brokenness in their life has also affected you.

We might fear that such grief could be selfish. And, of course, it could be. But it also may not be. Jesus appears to grieve here, in some way, over this man's disability – and he's not disabled. Which means there is space for righteous, faithful grief, both for those experiencing disability themselves, and for those who love them. Jesus models that for us here.

But such grief is often complicated, when it's rightly interwoven with trust in God, and sincere appreciation for the person with the disability.

Andrew Wilson, a pastor, author, and theologian, gives a helpful picture of this in the book *The Life We Never Expected*, which he wrote with his wife, about their experience raising two young children with special needs.

He writes this:

“Finding out your children have special needs is kind of like being given an orange.

“You're sitting with a group of friends in a restaurant. You've just finished a decent main course and are about to consider the dessert menu when one of your friends gets up [...] and announces he has bought desserts for everyone as a gift. He disappears around the corner and returns a minute later with an armful of round objects about the size of tennis balls, each beautifully wrapped with a bow on top.

“As he begins distributing the mysterious desserts, everyone starts to open them in excitement, and one by one, they discover that they have each been given a chocolate orange. Twenty segments

of rich, smooth, lightly flavored milk chocolate – a perfect conclusion to a fine meal and a very sociable way of topping off an enjoyable evening. [...] Then you open your present.

“You’ve been given an orange. Not a chocolate orange; an actual orange. Eleven segments of erratically sized, pith-covered pulp, with surprisingly large [seeds] in annoying places, requiring a degree in engineering in order to peel it properly, the consumption of which inevitably involves having juice run down to (at least) your wrists, being squirted in the eye with painful acid, and spending the remainder of the meal picking strands the size of iron filings out from between your molars. You stare at the orange in front of you with a mixture of [emotions]. The rest of the table hasn’t noticed. They’re too busy enjoying their chocolate.

“You pause to reflect. There’s nothing wrong with oranges, you say to yourself. They are sharp, sweet, refreshing, and zesty. The undisputed kings of the citrus fruit world [...] oranges are enlivening and flavorsome, filled with vitamin C, and far better for you than the mixture of sugar, milk powder, cocoa butter, and milk fat your friends are greedily consuming. [...] In fact, looking at the scenario from a number of perspectives – medical, dietary, environmental – you have actually been given a better dessert than everyone else. And you didn’t have a right to be given anything anyway. [It was a gift.]

“But your heart sinks all the same. An orange was not what you expected; as soon as you saw everyone else opening their chocolate, you simply assumed that was what you would get too. [...] A nice meal has taken an unexpected turn, and you suddenly feel isolated, [...] frustrated, even alone.

“Discovering your kids have special needs is like that.

[...]

“Special needs,” Wilson continues, “like the orange, are unexpected. We didn’t plan for them, and we didn’t anticipate them. Because our children are such a beautiful gift, we often feel guilty for even saying this, but we might as well admit that we didn’t *want* our children to have [special needs] [...]. So there are times when we’re wiping the citric acid out of our eyes and watching our friends enjoying their chocolate, when it feels spectacularly unfair [...]. We know that oranges are juicy in their own way. We know that they’re good for us and that we’ll experience many things that others will miss.”

But there is a sort of grief that still remains. [Wilson, 33-36]

And that grief is okay.

In this text we see that Jesus joins us in our grief. He understands our grief. In fact, he is more grieved by the brokenness in this world than we can even know. And so he can come alongside us in our own grief.

That’s the third thing we see here: Jesus’s grief.

Jesus’s Healing Work

Fourth, and finally, we see Jesus’s healing work.

And as we do, we should note just how comprehensive it is.

Jesus’s healing overcomes the physical disability itself. At the word of Jesus, the man’s ears are opened and his tongue is released.

But then, in addition to that, Jesus's healing also addresses the man's mind. The man, at that point, doesn't babel. He speaks plainly, we're told in verse 35. The man's condition, by its description, appears to have been with him since birth – it appears to be congenital. [France, 302] But if this man has been, all his life, without auditory input and auditory language, then certain parts of this man's brain would be underused, and so, we'd expect, under-developed. But Jesus heals that as well, as the auditory language centers of the brain begin working just right, and the man is able immediately to speak plainly.

But then, on top of that, Jesus's healing work also heals the experiential losses of this man's disability. He's had no opportunity to learn the specific language spoken by those around him – no chance even to hear it. But in verse 35 we're not told that he started learning words one at a time. We're told that he spoke plainly. Jesus's healing covers not just the physical brokenness, and the mental brokenness this man experienced – but it also somehow makes up for the social and experiential brokenness this man had endured of being cut off from his people's language all those years.

In other words, Jesus's healing work here covers every aspect of this man's disability: his body, his mind, his experiences.

And Mark makes it clear that this comprehensive healing here is meant to be a window into the kind of healing that Jesus will one day give to all his people.

And we know this, because in writing this account, Mark uses a very unusual word in verse 32 to describe the man's speech impediment. That word is used only one other time in the Bible – in the Greek translation of Isaiah 35. And commentators seem to agree that that word choice, along with the wording of verse 37, is Mark very intentionally pointing his readers back to Isaiah 35. [Bayer, 1908; France, 302; Keller, 101; Lane, 266; Peterson, 224; Ferguson, 115-116; Wright, 99]

And in Isaiah 35, we read about the Day of the Messiah. There, Isaiah writes that in that day, God's people “shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.” [35:2]

He continues, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. [35:5-6]

He adds: “Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not!’” For God “will come and save you.” [35:4]

“And the ransomed of the LORD shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

This is the promise of the Day of the Messiah. This is the promise of the healing Jesus will bring at his return.

The blind eye shall see. The deaf ear shall hear. The lame legs shall leap. The mute tongue shall sing. The schizophrenic mind shall be clear. The depressed heart shall laugh with joy. The demented mind will understand. The anxious heart will be at peace.

This is the healing Jesus promises for all his people on the day when he will return and he will make all things new.

Do you think about that? Do you reflect on it?

Joni Eareckson Tada does. Bound to a wheelchair, she recounts the times she has been in Christian assemblies, and when the congregation has gotten down on their knees, but she has had to remain in her chair.

Such moments, she writes, now make her think forward to that day when she will one day get up, out of her chair, on new resurrected legs.

She writes: “I can’t wait for that day because when I get my glorified body, the first thing I’m going to do with my resurrected legs is to fall down on grateful, glorified knees. I will once again have the chance to say with Psalm 95:6, ‘Come let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.’” [Erickson Tada]

On that great day, we all, like the crowd in verse 37, will be “astonished beyond measure” and we will proclaim that Christ our Lord “has done all things well.” We too will not be able to keep ourselves from proclaiming his goodness and his great works.

Conclusion

But, of course, we need not wait until then to praise him.

As we see his love for those who are struggling ... as we see him connect with those who are struggling ... as we see his grief over the brokenness of his people ... as we consider his promised healing that is to come, for all his people on the last day ... even now, for who he is, for what he has done, and for what he will do, we can praise and worship him.

For he truly has done, and certainly will do, all things well.

He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
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- Eareckson Tada, Joni. “Kneeling.” *Joni Eareckson Tada: Sharing Hope*. January 2, 2019. <https://www.oneplace.com/ministries/joni-and-friends/listen/kneeling-841979.html>
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- Keller, Timothy. *Jesus the King*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.
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Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.

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