

“Jesus Carefully Extended Her Cane”

Mark 7:31-37

Those of us, who were blessed with parents who made sure we were in Sunday School learning the Bible stories, remember the story of the “Healing of the Deaf Man”. But, as a much more skeptical adult reading the same Bible story, I can’t find the word “heal” or “healing” anywhere in the text. But, in verse 35, he was obviously healed when “immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly”.

So, rather than focusing on the healing itself, let’s take a look at how Jesus treated the deaf man before he gave him his hearing and speech.

The beginning of verse 32 says, “They brought to him a deaf man”. The word translated “brought” is related to the Greek word for “carry” or “tote”. They had their hands on him. Why? Deaf people can walk. The deaf man could have walked to Jesus by himself. His sight was fine. He was aware of what was going on around him. If he had wanted to, he could have found and approached Jesus on his own.

Ironically, nothing in our text indicates the deaf man himself tried to ask Jesus for anything, or that he even wanted to meet him. "They brought to him a deaf man." "They", those people, whoever "they" were, were the ones making the request. I think "they" may have been bringing him to meet Jesus against his own will. .

Why?

In the ancient world, people believed that deafness, blindness, and disabilities were punishments from God or the gods, depending on what religion they followed. Such a person, or even the entire family, is bad or evil, and getting what they deserved.

The Jews believed such people were unclean. They would refrain from associating with them; they would keep their distance from them to avoid becoming unclean by touching.

This man had been deaf since birth or infancy, which is why he could not speak clearly. He would have learned his lot in life, his place in society as an outcast living under God's curse. He would not have felt worthy to approach Jesus and risk making Jesus unclean. We can picture those people who brought him, eager to experience Jesus' healing power, dragging this deaf man to Jesus.

All of this is happening in Greek territory, not Jewish territory, in the region of the Decapolis — which are the Greek cities along the Mediterranean Sea. Jesus is on his way back to home territory along the Sea of Galilee.

The Jewish disciples traveling with Jesus are probably thinking, "Jesus, don't touch that unclean sinner; stay away from him. "

How Jesus treats the deaf man is very important. Jesus accepts him and is not afraid to touch him. As always, Jesus communicates through his actions. He takes him aside, privately, for a personal encounter away from the crowd. What anxious looks of surprise would have shown on the disciples' faces when Jesus turned his back on the crowd to be alone with the deaf man!

Verse 33 — "He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue."

Jesus inserted his fingers into his ears! That's getting pretty personal. When is the last time you placed your fingers into someone else's ears? Sticking Q-tips into your children's ears doesn't count.

Jesus' touch communicates acceptance as well as his intention to heal the deafness. The man knows Jesus loves him despite his disabilities as supposed curses from God.

Next, Jesus shows he will help the man speak. "He spat and touched his tongue." Jesus spits onto his fingers, gets the deaf man to open his mouth, probably by opening his own mouth and gesturing. Jesus reaches out with his hand to touch his spit to the deaf man's tongue.

People in the ancient world believed spit had curative properties as when you lick your wounds. I think it's miraculous that the man opened his mouth and allowed Jesus to do this, allowed Jesus to become even closer to him. The disciples were probably straining their necks to see Jesus do something that froze them with fear and was totally unacceptable. Jesus had crossed over into a close communion with this unclean deaf man.

What Jesus doesn't say next is worth noticing. He doesn't say, "be healed." He doesn't say, "Hear", or "Let your ears be opened." Jesus simply says to the whole man, "Be opened" or "Open up."

Perhaps, for the first time in his Life, another human being who happens to be the Son of God has accepted him. Jesus physically and emotionally touched him. He treated him with respect. The effect was to change the man's whole outlook on life. Now he knows the truth about God and himself, and the truth has set him free. Now he knows the truth about God and himself, and it is good news.

Deafness is not a punishment from God. No disability is a punishment from God. The deaf man is not evil. He is just like everyone else. God accepts him and loves him.

He's opened. His whole life is opened up, as it never had been before. He doesn't need to fear God anymore. He's had a close, private encounter with God's Son, and it was a positive, opening experience!

Jesus could have just given him his hearing and done nothing more. Instead, Jesus gave him special, private time, touched him intimately, accepted him and embraced him as a brother.

Then Jesus orders the crowd to keep quiet about it. But the more he told them to be quiet, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

It's almost humorous. Jesus gives a deaf man the ability to hear and speak but doesn't want him to use his new abilities. Jesus doesn't want anyone to hear or speak of it. No wonder they were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak".

Two thousand years later, Jesus continues to accept and to touch those of us with disabilities. Jesus continues to "open up" the lives of people with disabilities. Jesus continues to change people's outlook on life as we learn the truth and the truth sets us free. In my previous congregation in Nebraska, one of our youth, named Jessica, knew her disability was not a punishment from God, but rather could be used as a way to become closer to God and as a way to teach others the love and grace of God.

Jessica did just that during Confirmation camp. This is Youth Director Joni's description of how God worked through Jessica to communicate God's love and grace to others at Bible camp.

Joni entitles her story – "Jessica".

It was a first for me. Each year I take between 25-30 kids to Confirmation camp, but never someone who was legally blind.

Upon signing Jessica up, Aunt Sue explained that up until a year ago (when Jessica's mother died and she had come to live with them) she never had any formal religious training in her life. Sue was concerned that the stuff I would be teaching in Confirmation might be too complicated for Jessica and she didn't want her to feel uncomfortable by her lack of Biblical knowledge.

I assured Sue that it is not my practice to "put kids on the spot" but rather teach through "hands on learning" with the hope of the **experiencing** the Bible.

A personality like Jessica's has a way of welcoming strangers and she found a new friend almost immediately. The counselors and kids took pride in learning how to 'guide' a person without sight. The only unsatisfying experience would be that of mastering the log steps (obviously built by a person with sight).

During Confirmation camp, our first day's theme was Baptism. Upon acting out the story I needed a cast of John the Baptist, angels, a dove, the wind, God, a bunch of sinners . . . and Jesus, at which time Jessica's hand went up enthusiastically. Wow! Wouldn't Uncle Randy and Aunt Sue be surprised, I thought.

As the story went, many sinners asked John to **forgive** their sins, some were convincing and some were not (at which time the **crowd** would shout, 'you don't mean it!').

And then, the ultimate **experience** occurred . . . Jesus carefully extended her cane . . . walked up to John the Baptist . . . very humbly . . . with total sincerity . . . Jesus asked to be baptized . . . there was silence in the air . . .

I was covered with goose bumps . . . it was as though Jesus had actually stepped into Jessica's body that very moment to teach this lesson. I turned to the **crowd** and asked , “was that convincing?” And the crowd cheered!

As the dialog continued, so did Jessica continue to ‘walk in Jesus ways’, **without sight but with total heart!**

May the peace of God . . .

Hymn #704 – When the Pain of the World Surrounds Us (ELW)

#426 – O Son of God, in Galilee – (LBW)

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