

“Jesus Revealing God’s Compassion and Dedicated to His Mission”

Mark 7:31-37

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost 2021; September 5, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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Our Gospel reading tells us the story of how Jesus opened the ears of a man who could not hear. Surrounding this, however, we see Jesus engaged in some interesting and important behavior. His behavior involved avoiding certain things. He avoided drawing attention to Himself. He tried to avoid being recognized. He tried to avoid sensationalism. He was avoiding worldly glory. He was trying to avoid these things while also being responsive to human need as God’s Son in human flesh appearing. He was avoiding these things because He was dedicated to His essential mission, which involved obtaining our redemption by means of death on a Roman cross and leaving the tomb empty in resurrection from the dead.

We see Jesus avoiding these things in a number of ways. Our reading starts out by telling us that Jesus left the town of Tyre to go to the area around the Decapolis. His route took Him first to Sidon. And then, apparently, He skirted the northern side of the Sea of Galilee to get to the Decapolis.

Mark tells us earlier in this chapter that Jesus had gone to Tyre to get away. Jesus was trying to get away from Galilee for a while. Mark says that Jesus went to a house in Tyre, but He did not want anyone to know He was there (Mark 7:24).

It turns out that Jesus could not keep it a secret that He was in town. So He was there a few days and then moved on.

Jesus moved on to the area of Decapolis. The Decapolis was east of the Jordan River across from Galilee and Samaria. This made it southeast of Tyre.

But Jesus went through Sidon first, which was an unusual way to go. Tyre was northwest of the Sea of Galilee on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Sidon was also on the coast of the Mediterranean and north of Tyre. So Mark tells us that Jesus went north out of Tyre through Sidon and then turned east and then eventually southeast to skirt the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee to get to the area of the Decapolis. He went north to go southeast. That was a round about way of getting there.

That route suggests that Jesus was being unpredictable in His travels to avoid the crowds finding Him. And skirting the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee suggests that He was avoiding Galilee. He was avoiding the notoriety He had in Galilee.

This thought is reinforced a little later in Chapter 9 of Mark’s Gospel. There, after the transfiguration, Jesus did return to Galilee and went to Capernaum. But Mark says that Jesus “did not want anyone to know [it]” (Mark 9:30 ESV). And at that point Jesus taught His disciples once again that He was going to go to Jerusalem to be delivered into the hands of men and be killed, but after three days rise from the dead (Mark 9:31).

Jesus was dedicated to His mission which had the crucifixion and rising from the dead as its essential goal. Yet, He was so popular among the people in Galilee at that time, that His popularity threatened to keep Him from His goal. It was a very real possibility that the people would try to make Jesus king. But He was not a political revolutionary. He did not seek the throne and power and glory of an earthly kingdom.

So He went that round about way to the Decapolis.

The Decapolis is important too. The name means the ten cities. It was across the Jordan

from Galilee to the east. It was regarded in those days as gentile country, as was Tyre. Jesus was avoiding Galilee, Jewish territory. It was not yet time to complete His mission.

While in the area of the Decapolis, the crowd found Him again. Some people brought a man to Him who was unable to hear and who had something terribly amiss with his ability to talk. They urged Jesus to lay His hands on the man.

What did Jesus do? First, He did not turn the man away. Second, Jesus took the man aside from the crowd to a private place. He did this so that the crowd would not see the miracle and be sensationalized. The man was also not making a public spectacle or ruckus like some of the demons Jesus encountered that He did have to deal with publicly on the spot.

Jesus also did some other interesting things. He put His fingers in the man's ears. He spat. He then touched the man's tongue. Then Jesus also spoke, and it was the speaking that opened the man's ears and unbound his tongue. We will come back to this.

Why did Jesus do such things? We don't really know for sure. Mark does not explain this behavior. A commentator suggests that Jesus did these things to indicate to the man that He was about to heal him. It was suggested that spitting was an accepted thing in connection with physical healing in that culture. So Jesus was accommodating the man's understanding and indicating to the man what He was about to do.

Yet, putting His fingers in the man's ears, spitting, and touching the man's tongue did not actually cause the healing. He was going to heal the man by the word of God, which Jesus Himself speaks. But by doing the thing with His fingers and spitting and touching the man's tongue, maybe it would not seem quite like the miracle it actually was.

Of course, the fact of the healing itself could not be kept hidden. Jesus instructed the man and those who had brought him to Jesus not to tell anyone what had happened. But the more Jesus told them not to proclaim it, the more they did so (Mark 7:36). Jesus did not want attention brought to the healing. But He could not keep them from proclaiming it. The reaction of the people was of utter amazement and praise of God on account of Jesus.

Though Jesus did not want attention brought to the healing; though Jesus did not do it to cause a sensation, Jesus did it anyway. He received the man. He opened the man's ears and loosed the binding of his tongue. Mark describes the man's problem with speaking as a binding of the tongue. Jesus loosed the bonds so the man could speak.

How did Jesus do it? He looked up toward heaven, acknowledging God the Father (Mark 7:34). Yet it does not say that Jesus uttered a prayer there, as if relying on power He Himself did not have. Then He sighed, or at least that is what our English translation says (Mark 7:34). What does that suggest? It suggests that He groaned deep in His soul over the ruin that has come upon humanity.

We encounter the same Greek word in Romans 8 where the Apostle Paul says (as translated), "For we know that all creation groans together and suffers the pain of childbirth together until now. And not only that but we ourselves who have the first-fruits of the Spirit *groan* in ourselves, awaiting the adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22-23). Paul also says in 2 Corinthians 5:2, 4: "For in this earthly tent we are *groaning* desiring to put on our heavenly dwelling. . . . For being in this tent we are *groaning* being burdened, not wanting to be unclothed but further clothed, so that death should be swallowed up by life."

Paul also talks about the Holy Spirit groaning in us with *groans* that cannot be expressed in words as He intercedes for us with God the Father (Romans 8:26).

This groaning that Jesus did has to do with deep feeling about the brokenness that has come upon humanity due to sin and God's judgment against it. This brokenness manifests itself in the

soul in unbelief and sinful rebellion, and then the pain and grief that comes as a result. This brokenness manifest itself in the human body. This groaning involves that kind of pain in the soul over these things. As God the Son in human flesh appearing, God now groans about this. God the Son became a true human being. He now knows what it is like, the pain in the soul, the sorrow. It is like what John says about Jesus with a different word when Jesus came to the tomb of His good friend Lazarus. He saw His sisters crying and their friends crying. It says that Jesus was deeply moved in his Spirit (John 11:33).

And so Jesus groaned about the man's condition who could not hear and had difficulty speaking. This reveals God's identifying with us, His compassion, and His intent to save in Jesus. So He spoke and the man's hearing was restored. Jesus spoke, and the man's tongue was unbound.

Who is this that can speak and by His speaking cause reality to change and come into being? It should remind us of the creation account, Genesis 1, where it says that God said, and it was so: Let there be light, and there was light (Genesis 1:3). Jesus spoke, and it was so.

We have seen that Jesus was trying to avoid sensationalism and worldly glory, which the crowd would have been tempted to heap upon Him. On the other hand, He did not conceal the fact that God had kept His promise and had come to His people. This is the promise spoken by Isaiah: "Say to those with an anxious heart, Be strong, fear not! behold, your God will come and save you." And what happens then? "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped" (Isaiah 35: 4, 5 ESV). And so God came to His people. He did so in that amazing way as a true human being, to meet us as one of us. Jesus has come. Our God has come and kept His promise.

The people recognized this. They exclaimed that He had done all things well. For He caused the man who could not hear to hear, and who could not speak to speak (Mark 7:37).

But as our God in human flesh appearing, He keeps His focus on the cross and empty tomb, where He will obtain the reality of complete and final redemption, which will come to ultimate fulfillment for us in its own time. He won for us the power of the hope that lives in the encouragement from God to fear not, even in the face of death, death which causes deep fear and anxiety.

For Jesus opened the man's ears with a word. He took all sin upon Himself in His death. He arose in sin and death conquering life. He speaks forgiveness here. He gives us His Spirit. He meets us here with the body and blood by which He accomplished all of this, giving it to us by His Word.

Let us take refuge in Him and pray for peace and assurance for our hearts. For He has done, does, and will do all things well. Amen.