

“Hearing and Speaking”

Introduction: A couple of weeks ago my daughter Iela sent around a video of her daughter, Norie. The video featured this little 3-month-old infant lying on her stomach, gazing into a mirror, struggling to hold her head up, and giggling like crazy! Such giggling went on for well over a minute, long enough that all of us who were watching couldn't help but begin giggling along with her! It was, actually, one of the funniest moments I've ever witnessed!

We have a pretty good idea about what can make a baby cry, but as I've thought about that episode, I began to wonder: What makes a baby giggle? What did she find so funny as she stared at herself in the mirror? Additionally, over the past few months, as I've watched both of my granddaughters, I've wondered, what on earth are they thinking as they squirm and suck their hands and gaze off into space?! They can't really communicate yet and so we don't really know.

In like manner, well might we wonder what the man in our text was thinking, given, as Mark describes him, that he was deaf and could hardly talk. Last week we met a woman who approached Jesus boldly and who pretty much took charge of the conversation between the two, begging Jesus to heal her daughter. This morning, we meet a man whose friends had taken charge and were doing the begging on his behalf. What on earth was going on in his mind as they did so? What was going on in his mind as Jesus took him aside, away from the crowd? Let's begin there, and see how Jesus both cares for the man both emotionally and physically, as well as points to the ear opening, tongue loosening ministry of Jesus that we all need.

I. Jesus took him aside.

A. The location where Jesus chose to operate is well worth noticing. Not only is he in Gentile territory, but he chooses to take the man to a place where it can be just the two of them. Because of his difficulty speaking, it's likely that people have made fun of this fellow over the course of his life and Jesus doesn't want his healing, or this man, to become a spectacle. So, he seeks out a location where they can be alone. Right from the start, what a very kind and gentle way Jesus had with him, recognizing and caring for his emotional needs.

B. Because the man cannot hear, Jesus seeks to communicate with him using non-verbal cues. So, putting his fingers in the man's ears probably points to Jesus' intention to open them. Spitting and touching the man's tongue likely highlights the loosening of his tongue that would take place. And looking up to heaven as he prays, “Be opened!” identifies where the power Jesus had to make it all happen comes from. And while the man cannot yet hear the deep sigh that came from Jesus, he could certainly see it. Commentators suggest that the sigh indicates the strong emotion of Jesus as he wages war against the power of Satan, reversing the curse – the damage evil had done – as he brings physical healing to this man.

II. Jesus anticipates what is to come.

A. Of course, the reality is that Jesus' miracles touched only a small sliver of the people in Palestine during his lifetime, leaving, we might argue, a whole bunch of unhealed people on the outside looking in. But we need to see that his miracles point beyond the emotional and the

physical healing that touched a few people to something larger and grander that Jesus would one day bring for *all* people. In fact, I think we can say that the peoples' amazed declaration – "He has done everything well" – anticipates the declaration of God, seated on the throne of his new creation: "Behold, I am making everything new!" (Mk. 7:37; Rev. 21:5).

B. That things are headed in that direction is highlighted in this text by the phrase which described the man, "deaf and could hardly talk." It is found in no other place in the Bible except in our OT reading from Isaiah. It would seem that Mark wants us to go there and when we do, we hear the coming of the Messiah – the LORD – described as follows:

Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy . . . [Isa. 35:3-6]

C. Mark is saying, Do you see the blind opening their eyes? Do you experience the deaf hearing? Do you hear the mute tongue no longer tied but shouting for joy? God, in Jesus, has come. As you can see in his miracles, he has begun to make everything new. It's a project that he will finish upon his return. It's a promise made possible by the cross where we see this other phrase Mark wants us to notice, "divine retribution," played out. How does that happen?

D. We need look no further than our mother from last week and our man from this week, or the hungry crowd on the hillside or the fearful disciples in the middle of the lake – Jesus isn't smiting people. He's not wielding a sword. He's not seeking revenge. He's not taking power. In other words, he didn't come to bring divine retribution but to bear it, to take the penalty for our sin upon himself so that we can be made new. It's perhaps at least part of the reason for his deep sigh as he prepares to heal this man. Jesus has some sense of what it will cost him to do so.

III. Jesus calls us in the interim to hear and speak.

A. In the interim, Jesus instructs them all not to tell anyone what has just happened. Really?! How can you ask a man who's finally been given a voice not to use it? How can the mute tongue, now loosed, not shout for joy?! While it seems funny, and even somewhat irreverent, to read that the more Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone, the more they kept talking about it, well, of course they would!! Jesus wasn't embarrassed by what he'd done but it does seem that every time we hear him utter what is commonly known as the "Marcan secret," he's trying to avoid being swallowed up by the crowds and having his ministry derailed or hampered.

B. Further, I think Jesus has some sense that the magnitude of what he's done and is doing lies in the future, and that it will require the cross and empty tomb to fully understand, so he doesn't want folks to come to any conclusions before the story has been completed. In the end, it seems that Jesus is content to tell them to be quiet with a bit of a hidden smile.

C. Now, what Jesus begins to do for the disciples, and for us, in this text, is to help us untangle our own spiritual deafness. As Isaiah puts it early in his work, we can be hearing but not understanding, and we can be seeing but not perceiving (6:9-10). Later he puts it like this: "You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen" (42:20). As

Jesus would later put it to his disciples: “Do you still not see or understand? . . . Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?” (Mk. 8:17-18).

The reality is that Jesus needs to open our ears so we can really hear his word and understand the fullness of who he is. Jesus needs to loosen our tongues so that we can effectively speak his word and share the good news with others. How might that happen?

Jesus taking this man away from the crowd so that the two could be quietly together is a good image for us to hold. We may not be surrounded by a large crowd, but we are surrounded by noise, the noise of our radios and televisions, the noise of competing religious or philosophical systems, the noise that comes from the demands of our families or places of work. If we really want to hear so that we can understand and listen so that we can speak, we’ll need to be intentional and set aside some time and space to be quiet with Jesus. How we listen is also critical. In this vein, you might check out a way of holy reading called “Lectio Divina,” which is described on our website under the Learn and Grow tab. It can help you read slowly and reflectively.

Isaiah describes one who it seems has experienced this ear opening, tongue loosening ministry of the Spirit:

The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed. [50:4]

Fortunately, the LORD is not like the rooster who lives next door to me and wakens me quite early just, it seems, because he can! The LORD wakens us because he desires to do a good and ongoing work in us, and then through us to the world around us. May we listen well so that we may more fully come to know the life he has come to bring us, and then share that life with others.