

The Healing of a Deaf Man with an Impediment of Speech

Mark 7:31-37

Howard Gregory
Anglican Bishop of Montego Bay, Jamaica

Many years ago, before I entered seminary, I worked in what is called in the U.S. a savings and loan institution. One day a lady came into the crowded office and approached me talking at the top of her voice. She had various questions and she offered some instructions. As she talked, all the customers began looking over at us. I tried going closer to her to see if I could through the modulation of my voice stop her from speaking so loudly. But the softer I spoke, the louder she became, and the more embarrassed I became. Feeling somewhat between anger and embarrassment, I quickly took her book from her and went across to my supervisor to explain what was happening and my frustration in communicating with the lady. As soon as he took the passbook from me he smiled and said: "Oh, this is Ms. X. She is deaf, but she is a wonderful soul." We walked back to her and in a very moderate voice he spoke to her, asking what she needed. She was soon smiling as her concerns were addressed. I felt so silly after all of this, as I saw how easy it all could work out. But I could not help wondering how it must feel for her to be deaf and to encounter persons like me who could be so impatient and embarrassed by her disability.

In the gospel reading for today, Jesus encounters a man suffering from a double disability—deafness and an impediment of speech. Jesus takes the man aside, "away from the crowd." In this way Jesus removes the man from a potentially embarrassing situation and from the unhealthy curiosity of the onlookers. In my culture, and perhaps in yours, some people when they see someone with a disability want to know: "What is wrong with him or with her?" Some persons with disabilities have all kinds of stories to tell about violating questions people ask them about the nature of their condition. Jesus sought to provide a secure space where he could be with this man, and through the encounter bring transformation to his life.

Those who seek to offer charity can too often be patronizing and demeaning toward those whom they seek to help. We in the Caribbean have known this kind of disrespect that sometimes comes from various international bodies, both church and non-church. They treat us as if we are a bunch of thieves and criminals. Before they give us ten dollars they want us to tell them about the whole layout of our personal lives and finances.

During my tenure as president of the United Theological College of the West Indies, I often had to relate to external bodies and partner agencies that would give us a small grant. They would not only require an audited statement of how the donated funds were spent, but they would also want the audited statement of the entire college affairs. This, of course, we regarded as entirely intrusive and demeaning. In this way it seemed to us that the help offered for the challenges we faced was humiliating help, that it involved dragging us into the public arena for all to see our need. Equally challenging was the attempt to get agencies to work with us to achieve a greater level

of independence. An institution would be willing to give a grant each year to the college toward the support of a faculty position but balked when we proposed working together to create an endowment that would give us a self-sustaining faculty position. So what we received was an offer of help—help with one level of impediment, perhaps the hearing impediment—but not help with another, perhaps the impediment of speech whose healing would grant too much independence. If the “speech” had also been healed, it would not have been necessary to go back to the institution in a dependent posture.

Jesus sets a pattern for us in his reaching out to this man. Jesus affirms the one to be the recipient of his generosity and healing power. Perhaps also, Jesus saw in this moment and this encounter the possibility of personal transformation as this man’s gift to him. This miracle of Jesus has an unusual dimension to it—Jesus does not simply speak and say a word that cures and brings healing. Instead, he does something physical.

Here I want to suggest that we may need to dig a bit deeper to see what Jesus is about in this action. Jesus is in Gentile territory, and perhaps what we see is his responding to the folkways of the people. Many Jamaicans still consult the folk healer concerning their medical conditions. This person is sometimes referred to as the “four-eye man.” We know full well that when people go to see the “four-eye man” or folk healer, if he does not offer a bath, a bottle of “oil of something” and a psalm to recite, he is not regarded as effective. He cannot simply utter a word or give an explanation, as there is no power in “the word.” Power resides in the symbolic action. Jesus is probably aware of the folk tradition that says that the healer must touch the affected part as a way of producing a cure, so Jesus put his finger into the man’s ears, spat, and touched the man’s tongue. Many of you who have been parents also know that when your child gets a fall or a bruise, the tears and the yelling and screaming will not stop until Mommy kisses the affected area. Jesus, of course, could have simply said the word and the man would have been healed of his double impediment. But Jesus chose to connect with the man where he was in terms of his belief system.

Here we face a challenge as church. If we who proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot speak to persons where they are with all of their hurts, pains, doubts, and struggles, and with their God-given uniqueness, then we have compromised the gospel’s power and effectiveness.

One of the challenges facing the church in many metropolitan centers in the U.S., Canada, and Europe is how to relate to Christians from other cultures who come to live in their midst. More specifically, how to receive fellow Christians of the same denomination who come from different national, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds as uprooted and displaced persons. On the surface, the issue is about hospitality. But let me suggest that the images of impediment of speech and hearing may be an appropriate metaphor for talking about the relationships between both groups of people. Here I speak out of my own experience as an Anglican/Episcopalian. During the migratory movements of the 1950’s and 60’s, devoted Anglicans who left the Caribbean to live in England found the church unwelcoming of them. Consequently, many of them left and became Pentecostals, as this was the only place where they could find a home. Ironically, many grand old Anglican places of worship have been sold to these Pentecostals and have now become the new and vibrant centers of worship in postmodern England.

In New York today, most of the vibrant Episcopal congregations are made up of West Indian and African Anglicans who worship in ethnic churches whose liturgical, social, and cultural life has little relation to the life of mainstream Episcopalian life. They are there, and they occupy congregations that were on the verge of closing and which they have now restored to viable centers of worship. But the encounter between “mainstream” churches and ethnic congregations, in particular the welcoming of the ethnic congregations, is still to take place.

One is also left to wonder about the extent to which seminaries reflect an openness to and facilitation of this process of encounter and welcome in the formation of the clergy and in the promotion of the life of the church in its congregational expression. Where do we see this encounter and welcome in the composition of a seminary student body, faculty, curriculum, and in the supervised ministry placements in the ethnic/multicultural congregations? Inclusion will only take place when Christians in the larger ecclesiastical community are prepared to practice what Jesus exemplifies in his encounter with the man, not as one who is “whole” standing above one who has “an impediment,” but as one who affirms and sees the humanity in the person who may be different. It will not happen from a distance, or out of sheer curiosity, but out of due regard for the humanity of the other and the oneness in Christ that we share. It means being willing to touch the other and to engage the other where cultural and other practices and beliefs may differ.

It has been suggested that this story of the healing of this man who was dumb and had an impediment of speech may in fact be a representation of the disciples of Jesus and their situation. If this story is speaking of the deafness of the disciples and their impediment of speech, then the disciples of Jesus had a lot to learn before they were ready for release from their deafness or before they were ready to have their impediment of speech removed. Indeed, the most difficult part for them to understand was who Jesus was as the redemptive agent of God—that he would suffer and die and on the third day be raised to life again.

Perhaps if the church is to become the instrument of the affirming and inclusive love of Jesus we, like the disciples, will need to have the impediments to our hearing and to our speech removed. There are interesting stories told about the late revered Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. Eric Williams. Dr. Williams had a hearing problem and had to wear a hearing aid. It is said that during many of the debates in Parliament when he did not want to hear what was being said by the various parliamentarians, no doubt especially by those of the opposition, he pulled out his hearing aid. Perhaps it is not that we lack the facility of hearing, but that many of us Christians in our private lives and in the life of our congregations pull out our hearing aids when we do not want to hear a challenging word from the Lord.

Perhaps if we allowed our Lord to touch the impediments of our lives, our hearing and our speech, then we might be able to incarnate the pattern that Jesus set for us in reaching out to this man in our text. If so, perhaps we will also in our time be able to engage others, welcome others, and touch others in ways that affirm, include, heal, and transform.