

Making Connections

In the name of him who does *all* things well, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: This morning's Gospel lesson gives us the brief and straightforward account of Jesus encountering a deaf-mute man and giving him the ability to hear and speak. It's wonderful, of course; but when compared to so many of the other healing miracles of Jesus, this one seems ... well ... rather unremarkable. And what I mean is that we have lots of healing stories in the New Testament ranging from fairly minor ones, like when Jesus cures Peter's mother-in-law of a fever, all the way to some that are really spectacular, like when he completely restores people who are horribly disfigured by leprosy or when he raises the dead from their graves – *very* impressive. I think we'd have to admit that on the spectrum of levels of awe that a miracle might inspire, this one we have today appears to be rather low. Sure, it's more than any of us could do; but we're talking about *Jesus* here. We've come to expect amazing things from him.

Beyond that, the way the church calendar is arranged, we always hear several of these miraculous healing stories in the early part of the year – especially throughout the Epiphany season when we focus on the first part of Jesus' ministry – when he's just beginning to get his name out there. But here we are in the latter half of the long season of Pentecost; a time when we normally focus on later events in Jesus' earthly life and on the finer points of his teachings. So, all in all, this text might seem kind of ho-hum. It doesn't seem to promise much in the way of wonderful new insights for us. But maybe that's because we're not really hearing what the text is saying to us. I've said before that the miracles of Jesus are never just displays of his divine power. There is always a teaching that's being illustrated. And if we allow Jesus to really open our ears to listen, we'll hear and understand the truth he wants us to receive.

So let's start by getting a little background on the text. Jesus and his disciples are returning from the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. He had withdrawn to the locale of these very cosmopolitan Gentile cities to have some time away from the press of Jewish crowds that were constantly hounding him for more miracles. He needed time for rest and for private instruction with his twelve disciples. That having been accomplished (at least to some degree), he is now returning inland to more familiar territory around the Sea of Galilee. But rather than go right back to his old stomping grounds near Capernaum at the north end of the lake, he avoids those places and takes a long trip around to the southeast shore, to the area called the Decapolis. This also is Gentile country. But the population here is peppered with a mix of Jews who don't mind living among the Gentiles – and who are therefore not likely to be very observant in a religious sense.

Still, even way down here people have heard of the miracle worker called Jesus. And so, when it becomes known that the great Rabbi is in the area, people turn out to see for themselves if what they've heard is true. Certainly that's the case for the folks who bring this deaf-mute man to Jesus. It turns out that they are among the first of a crowd that will in a matter of days swell to some 4000 people whom Jesus will later feed with miraculously multiplied food (you might remember that story).

But getting back to *this* story, the text says the man they bring to Jesus is deaf and has difficulty speaking. The Greek word Mark uses literally means "thick tongued", suggesting that he *could* speak to a certain extent, but not very intelligibly. Now, it was rare in those days that a person born deaf could speak at all, so it seems likely that his deafness was something that

happened to him later in life – sometime after he had learned to speak. Perhaps it was an infection of the ear, nose, and throat that took his hearing and caused nerve damage in the throat and tongue. The sort of things we treat rather routinely these days with antibiotics could result in serious injury back then. But whatever the cause of his disability, they bring this man to Jesus with the request that he lay his hands on him.

But rather than do exactly as they request, Jesus takes the man aside for a more personal session. And what I want you to see is that St. Mark, who is the only evangelist who relates this story, and who is normally quite brief and chooses his words very carefully, couches this whole episode in what we might call “creation language”.

You remember how that, back at the time God created the world, he spoke all things into existence. When he wanted light, he said, “Let there be light”, and just like that, the light came on. Same thing with the sun, moon, planets, and stars: he spoke, and there they were. He just speaks the word and oceans, mountains, plants, trees, and all the critters that live on earth, air, and sea—everything just springs into being at his command. Ah, but when he gets to the crown of his creation, he comes to a halt. When everything is finally ready and all is in its place, the Lord God rolls up his sleeves, as it were, and begins to form the man out of the dust and water. The actual word there is the one used to describe a potter working with clay. It’s very “hands on” and personal. There’s an intimacy there – a close relationship being formed between the Creator and the creature, as the Lord presses his own image into the clay.

And that’s what Jesus does with this man: he pulls him aside privately, *personally*, and gives him his undivided attention. He’s making a connection with the man. He’s establishing a relationship with him. And when you think about it, this is something the man hasn’t had for years. Oh, he’s been *with* people all the time; but he hasn’t been able to communicate with them. He can’t hear what’s going on around him, he doesn’t know what people are saying, and no one bothers to try to understand what he has to say. His words are sloppy and malformed; no one has the patience to listen. And besides, because he sounds like half-wit, most people probably assume that he is one. They go about their business as if he wasn’t there – treating him more like a piece of furniture than a person. The only ones who pay him any attention at all are mean-spirited children who call him names that he can’t hear and who entertain themselves by imitating the way he speaks. So he’s been imprisoned in a sort of solitary confinement: part of the world of people around him; but unable to connect to any of them.

Jesus makes the connection. He reaches into the man’s isolation to bring him out of it. He looks into his eyes – and through his sympathetic gaze he speaks volumes: “I understand you. I know what your life is like. I can feel your frustration and seclusion. And I want to help.” Now, again, put yourself in the sandals of this poor fellow. He doesn’t know Jesus. He’s never heard of him – how could he? And it’s highly unlikely that anyone even tried to explain to him why they brought him here today. But now, as he looks into the face of the Lord’s compassion, he realizes that he’s no longer alone. On a level deeper than any mere human relationship he is being touched, shaped, formed ... And then, again, just as at creation, the Lord merely speaks the word and it is: “*Ephphatha*”, “Be opened”, and the doors to this man’s prison swing open. His ears can hear perfectly; his tongue is untied and he can speak plainly. Now, having established a relationship with Jesus, he can also communicate with others.

The crowd of people standing in the background and straining to see what’s been going on is astonished at the miracle. Echoing the Lord’s own words spoken at the time of creation – and those of the angels who sang for joy while witnessing God at work, they issue the pronouncement, “It is good”. “He has done all things well.”

So, like I said, the story stirs up several themes that suggest creation to us – but strictly speaking, we're not dealing here with creation, but rather *recreation*. Jesus is restoring what are lost capacities in this man. The man has been out of touch, and now he's getting reconnected. And with that in mind, I'd like to focus a little more on exactly how Jesus does that.

Notice *where* Jesus *touches* this man. They asked him to lay his hands on him – presumably on the top of his head or on his shoulders or something. But Jesus doesn't do that. No, he touches him precisely where there's something wrong. Jesus comes into direct contact with what's dysfunctional and broken in this man's life – not with the parts that are working okay. He touches him where his wounds are, as it were. First the ears, then the tongue (and there's probably a lesson there too: something about how we should learn to listen before we speak).

And then there's this deal with the spitting. What's that about? Something tells me that if you went to a doctor or a dentist, and he spit on his finger before he put it in your mouth, you wouldn't be very happy with him. And I don't imagine that the reaction of people 2000 years ago would be any different. It's kind of weird. So, why did Jesus do it? Hang on to that question; because I also want to consider this deep sigh the text mentions, because they go together. We read that Jesus looks up to heaven and gives this mighty – almost pained – exhalation before he heals the man. That's sort of weird too, isn't it?

Or is it? Think about the other times we hear about the Lord exhaling: like when he formed the first man, and breathed into him the breath of life. Or when the Lord Jesus was dying on the cross for the life of the world; then we hear how he looked up into heaven, asked his Father to receive his spirit, and then he exhaled forcefully and died. Or after the resurrection, when he appeared to his disciples: there we read how he breathed on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit". Do you see it? All these exhalations of the Lord have to do with giving and restoring life to people and reconnecting them to God. When the Scriptures speak of the Lord exhaling, it has to do with establishing and rebuilding broken relationships.

So, study again how Jesus deals with this man: first, he touches what's broken; then, directly from the mouth of the Lord *water ... Spirit ... Word*. And the man is made whole again. He's connected. Jesus makes contact with the man through water, Spirit, and Word. Hmm ... that sounds familiar, doesn't it? Are you making the connection? Sounds a lot like Baptism, doesn't it? Think about it: isn't that how and when the Lord first connected to you? You were born disconnected: dead in sin, under the curse of God's wrath, and separated from life with him. But then somebody brought you to Jesus – for most of us, long before we could really understand what was going on. And though there might have been a large crowd there, Jesus took you aside for a very personal and private session. And he touched you; touched you where you were broken: right on your sinful heart. And through water and his Word, he breathed on you his Spirit. He connected you to himself, and more specifically to his death for your sin – when he became "disconnected" from God the Father in your place. But with water, Word, and Spirit, he cleansed you of your sin and brought you into the family of God by giving you faith in him. Now, please don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that in this episode we are witnessing a Baptism *per se*; rather that Jesus is dealing with this man in a way that is *baptismal* – in a way that shows us what our Baptisms are all about.

They're about making connections – and also about remaking them when, by our sins, the connections fail and we fall out of touch again. That's what our sin does: it disconnects us from God and puts us in a kind of isolation. And I think we've all experienced that. It happens when you know you are doing something wrong, or when you've behaved in a way that wasn't

right and you haven't yet dealt with it. At such times, what you're doing is saying, "Lord, I know what you have to say about this, but right now I'm trying very hard not to hear you." And have you ever tried to pray to the Lord about something else at such a time – when you know you're displeasing him in some area of your life and you want to pretend that everything's okay? The just words don't come, do they? You really don't even want to try to pray. When you're not receiving, when you're not listening, it's very hard to transmit. You have to get reconnected.

And that means going back to Baptism: that's what confession and absolution is all about. We come to Jesus and ask him to repair the broken lines – the lines we've cut by our sins. Through confession we name what's broken; we tell the Lord of our sins. And just like at our Baptisms, we hear Christ's words of absolution: "I forgive you all your sins". Then we're reconnected. That's why, on Sunday's we do that, I always stand at the Baptismal font. It's to say, "Now Jesus is touching what's broken in you, and through his Word and Spirit, he's washing you clean once again. You're reconnected. Of course, you can do that on your own wherever you are. You don't have to wait for Sunday to get reconnected. Your *daily* repentance is a return to your Baptism and the connection to Christ it gives.

And it's also how we connect to each other. Just as sin disconnects us from God, it also puts us out of touch and at odds with other people. Some of you may remember how the old phones used to be, before there was rotary dialing – and long before there was touch-tone or cell phones. To talk with someone, to be able to hear and speak to them, you had to go through the operator who ran the switchboard. If either one or both of you were disconnected from the operator, there was no way you could communicate with each other. The same is true for us: unless you're connected to the Lord who is *the Operator*, you are effectively deaf and mute. Communications fail. You're cut off. And so I ask, with whom are you disconnected? Your spouse? Your parents? Your child? Someone else in God's family? Best check your own line first to be sure there're no breaks; that is, ensure no unresolved and unrepented sins of your own are cutting communications; and if there are, get them repaired. And then, if there's still no connection, you might help the other party to see if there's a break in their line.

For in Jesus – through his healing touch of Word and Spirit – we can all be reconnected: to the Lord God and through him to one another – for he does all things well. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!