

As we think about this morning's text, I want to briefly explore three themes: 1) The relationship of our senses 2) The balance of our private and public actions and 3) Silence as secret or invitation.

In this morning's passage, Jesus remains on the Gentile side of the lake, but he's still interacting with a mostly-Jewish crowd. It comes to Jesus' attention that a man with a hearing impairment is now also being affected by a speech impediment. The friends of this man beg Jesus to heal his afflictions in order that he might be able to communicate again – that is, in order that he can once more be in community with his community.

### **The Relationship of Our Senses:**

We ought to pay attention to the mention of both deafness and muteness. In most healing stories, we hear about a singular affliction that causes isolation from community. In this person's case, he was either born with a hearing impairment, or has developed one with age. At some point, the man's speech was unaffected. Now, as his hearing worsens, it's debilitating his ability to speak. This person's intake and output are reduced, and the combination leaves him isolated from community.

I don't doubt that Jesus offered care and healing to this man. But I think the author of Mark is using this man's story as an illustration for the whole collective of Israel. What happens if your ability to hear the Word of God, or to recognize and apply the Spirit of Torah become diminished? There's a whole lot less likelihood that you might be able to speak the Word of God or communicate the Spirit of Torah. You might also put it this way: If you can't hear good news, it's really hard to proclaim it.

Mark's author reminds us, the modern-day listener, not so subtly, and the characters within the drama, a bit more subtly, that Jesus is Messiah. Jesus is the presence that can unclog the ears of a stubborn and distracted people. And God's Spirit is the energy that can flow through them, give voice to their possibilities, and proclaim the good news of a bright future.

So...if we look closely here, Jesus is healing a very localized need of an individual. But Jesus is also reminding us that his larger ministry is addressing systemic issues that have created a lingering woundedness.

Jesus speaks to us corporately. Mark's author implores the whole of Israel to receive good news, to turn from its destructive ways, and to live into new possibilities. Israel is also an ever-expanding term, one that will eventually incorporate the Gentile world, too. But the macro-gospel can't happen without micro encounters.

### **The Balance of Public and Private Actions:**

I think it's really important to recognize the corporate elements of this story, but also celebrate the personal ones, too. Jesus shows his full humanity here. He pulls this man aside. He gives him his full attention. The text is in a rush, because the story's got to be finished, but wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall for this half-hour encounter? Of course, Jesus gets a name. Of course, Jesus asks the best questions to learn about this man's circumstances. Of course, Jesus knows how to listen in order to best empathize with how this neighbor is feeling. Of course, Jesus finds a creative way to communicate when traditional methods aren't working. The prophetic work of Jesus is undergirded in the pastoral care of Jesus. The healing that Jesus publicly proclaims is mirrored in his encounters with everyday people.

Destructive systems are the sum of a million acts of apathy and distance. Healthy communities are the sum of a million acts of compassion. Jesus' work today reminds us that transformative change begins with ground-level compassion. It begins by engaging neighbors who have been shut out of community conversations. It's got to begin in intimate spaces where healing is incubated.

### **Silence as Secret or Invitation?**

Stop viewing the secret as an exclusive practice. All throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus does transcendent things, only to follow each action with a common phrase: "Shhhhhhh." This isn't Fight Club! The first rule of the ministry of Jesus is not "Don't talk about the ministry of Jesus." I think it's much more of a "Don't let the hearing of the ending spoil the beginning and the middle of the story."

In this story, Jesus heals the man's afflictions. And he tells those around him to keep silent. And they don't. It's like a giant game of telephone. Imagine the National Mall in Washington. The front row sees the healing. Immediately they tell the row behind them, and that row the one behind them, and so it goes until the last row. And before long, the crowd is chanting as if in a European Football Match: "He's here. He's there. He heals the deaf and blind. Jesus! Jesus!"

It's not that this momentum is bad on the surface. Rather, it's that this momentum isn't reflective of the transformational and very personal power of the gospel. Jesus isn't trying to manipulate a crowd of followers into feeling an amped up sense of empowerment or electricity. He's trying to encourage people to create encounters with one another that result in meaningful and sustained relationships.

This isn't a crowd being forced to chant for Caesar. This is a crowd, transformed on a personal level, praising the goodness of God.

Let me phrase that another way. Jesus, I think, is asking his followers to learn how to hear again, in order that they may speak more effectively. Jesus invites people into the practice of sharing their lives with one another. Such a practice will incubate the kinds of universal healing that ripple through communities in the same way good news ripples through a crowd.

When Jesus says don't tell the others, he's not covering up information. He knows that the good news of God's possibilities is gonna be revealed – that's all set in motion. There's no bottling it up. And God can indeed, and will indeed, "do everything well!"

Let's put it all together.

Our senses are interconnected. We cannot speak well if are unable to hear or see well.

Our actions in private have a profound impact on what we do in public.

Our silence is not always a tool of exclusion.

What does that mean for a Lenten people in the middle of a Lenten season?

What Sardis, is preventing our hearing in this season? Over the last week, Greg has shared a number of stories that five generations of Charlotteans have failed to hear. If we're gonna be a voice that helps to

be a source of healing in our community, then we had better work on ways to hear the voices that have been muted.

We talk about being awake to systemic injustice. We're really good at identifying trends that create woundedness. But what are we doing, each of us, in quiet corners – dinner tables, hospital lobbies, water coolers, zoom calls – to be present and attentive to our neighbors?

We talk about silence – what's the right time to make known what's important? How Sardis, might we decipher when our voices are drowning out the ones that most need to be heard? And how might we discern when our silence does the same thing? What's more important to us? Are we more concerned with controlling the narrative of God, or are we more concerned with ensuring that God is seen, heard, felt, and realized by every neighbor in our world?

May God give each of us the strength to hear well, and speak well, be heard, and be seen, and may all of our hearing, speaking, and seeing begin on a personal level.

Amen.