

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Isaiah 35:4-7a, Mark 7:24-37

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>32</sup>And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech; and they besought him to lay his hand upon him. (Mark 7:32, RSV)

In our First Lesson, from Isaiah 35, we hear the beautiful prophecy that there will come a time when the ills of humanity will be healed. The prophecy about the lame person leaping like a deer has always meant a lot to me. I have thought of it many a time as I have visited people in the hospital and elderly folks in their apartments or in retirement homes. Nowadays this promise about the lame man especially means a lot to me as I think of my poor brother. Many of you have heard me say that he carries himself with great grace under the fierce burdens of Multiple Sclerosis. Listen to these splendid promises again:

[Your God] will come and save you.  
<sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
<sup>6</sup>then shall the lame man leap like a hart,  
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.

Oh! There are wonders ahead for us! Marvelous things shall be done.

What our First Lesson does not say is *how* the healing will be done. The Lord will do the healing – that we know. As the text says, “Your God... will come and save you.” But how he will save is left to our imaginations. Surely, a word from him would be sufficient. He who commanded light and stars and oceans and humanity into being with a mere command, “Let them be,” is certainly able to heal our poor bodies with a mere command, “Let them be well again.” And it shall be so.

So, the divine Word can do it, no doubt about that. But perhaps we can especially cherish this morning’s Gospel Lesson because it gives us concrete pictures of the Word at work healing people. Jesus does it. In our particular Gospel Lesson he heals the demon-possessed daughter of the Syrophenician woman, and he heals the deaf man with an impediment in his speech.

## **DIFFERENCE IN METHOD**

These two stories illustrate a difference in method of healing. The victory of the Syrophenician woman was hard-won, but once it was won, the actual healing was done easily and at a distance. Jesus simply tells the woman that her faith has gained the healing of her daughter. Jesus says to her:

“...you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.”  
<sup>30</sup>And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone.

No need to walk the Master home. No need for him to command the demon “Begone!” No need for him to take the girl by the hand and raise her up. A word to the mother suffices. Alleluia! What a good day that was for mother and daughter when the torment of the demon was ended.

The healing of the deaf man with the impediment of speech is a different matter. That healing involved a much more “hands on” approach by Jesus. This is the story I want to linger with and invite us to enjoy.

## **PITY THE POOR MAN**

But before getting to the actual method of healing, let us pause for a moment to pity this man. All disabilities run deep. Life in this fallen world involves continual adjustments for each of us, and many people with disabilities adjust to them and work around them and carry on beautifully in life. Still, there is something about this man’s disabilities that might strike us hard. Maybe for me it because I am preacher. The notion of not being able to hear and having trouble speaking is troubling for me. Time and time again I pray for grace to listen well and then to answer well. If I could do neither – if I could neither hear nor get my tongue around the right words – that would be a sorrow for me.

This man’s disabilities concerned his ability to communicate with others. How could he be a shopkeeper if he could not hear the orders over the phone or understand what the person across the counter was saying? How could he be an attorney or a teacher or a politician if he had trouble speaking? His intelligence might have been top-notch, and the words in his head might have been wise and poetic, but if he had an impediment in his speech, that would be a setback for him. Trouble hearing and trouble speaking. Maybe he could not even hear his little daughter say, “Daddy, I love you.” He could know perfectly well that his daughter loves him, but also it would be sweet to hear the words. Commerce with humanity: it was set back by this man’s inability to hear and to speak.

## **POINTING AND TOUCHING**

So Jesus heals the man. His friends bring him to Jesus, and Jesus heals the poor man. He does not ask the man whether he wants to be healed. He does not ask the

man whether he believes in Jesus. He simply takes the sufferer aside and heals him. Great day in the morning! Jesus gave this man a new lease on life.

But his method here was not so effortless as in the miracle of the Syrophenician woman. With the woman, a mere word did the deed. But with this man, Jesus lingers and touches and spits and sighs. At last, Jesus gives the great command: “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” Then the miracle is done. The man’s ears are opened and his tongue loosed, and he is well, free to get on with life.

But there were all these physical things Jesus did with the man before healing him. With the woman, he did all with a simple word. With this man, his method was more complex and more individual. It involved touching, as if Jesus were pointing to where he wanted to do his wonder. First he pointed to the man’s ears. Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he touched the man’s tongue. Jesus seems to have put saliva from his mouth onto the tongue of the man with the speech impediment.

These careful motions rather put me in mind of our recent Confirmation liturgies. I am thinking of that part of the liturgy called “The Marking with the Cross.” Bishop Rimbo or Sister Melinda called out the part of the body, and I claimed that part for Christ with the sign of the holy cross. The eyes, the ears, the forehead, the tongue, the shoulders, the hands, the feet. We have been bought with a price, the Apostle says, and therefore we should “glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20, RSV). So we claimed the bodies of these dear young people for Christ, part by part.

Likewise here. Jesus reclaims the ears and the tongue for himself, and thereby he grants them again to the man.

## **LET US LEAVE THE METHOD TO JESUS**

That Jesus can save and heal his people is certain. Every miracle and every wonder done by Jesus in the Bible should serve as an encouragement to us to believe that Jesus can save his people. His heart and his power are great, and he will heal.

But perhaps we should hesitate some about trying to prescribe the *method* of healing to Jesus. He chose one method with the Syrophenician woman and a different method with the deaf man. In the end, we should trust the method to his sovereign will, and know that he does all things well.

This can be a hard thing to do. In fact, it might break our hearts for now. Imagine how hard those few intervals of delay must have been for that mother. She comes to Jesus. She begs for the healing of her daughter. She asks nothing for herself, but from deep love, she asks on behalf of her daughter. Her request of Jesus reveals her confidence in him. She has done him no wrong, yet for a moment or two, she must endure the misery of his delay:

<sup>27</sup>And he said to her, “Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”  
(Mark 7:27, RSV)

Being likened to a dog or a puppy is bad enough. The real agony must have been the uncertainty. Is he going to heal the girl?

Well, yes, he did heal the child. But he chose this puzzling method of delay – this hard question about the priority of the Jews over the Gentiles in his mission. Someday, she will understand. Someday, in heaven, she will understand why Jesus treated her in this method, and she will give thanks. Perhaps there is one thing we can say even now: this uneasy exchange between Jesus and the Syrophenician lady gives the rest of us a powerful example of persevering in prayer. That’s what this lady did. She prayed through to victory. She did not take no for an answer, but continued to bring her petition to the Lord.

And well she should! Well we all should. For Jesus himself has promised that he and his heavenly Father will grant our prayers – not just hear them, but grant them. His promise is right there in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew Chapter 7:

<sup>7</sup>Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:

<sup>8</sup>For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

<sup>9</sup>Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone ?

<sup>10</sup>Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?

<sup>11</sup>If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? (Matthew 7:7-11, KJV)

So let us ask! Only, let us not insist upon the method. Let us *ask* for the method. Let us ask with all our hearts, and with no hesitations. But let us not *insist* upon the method of healing, nor imagine that God has not heard us if we do not get the way of healing we want. Instead, let us wait upon the Lord in confidence. One day, we will shall be healed and our loved ones shall be healed. Nothing can stop Jesus from this, not even death itself. Nothing can prevent the love of Jesus for his people from reaching its good goal.

Long ago my Sunday School teacher shared a thought that still seems plausible to me, even to this day. “Why did the Lord let that person die?” we asked. “We

prayed for her healing, yet she died! How can this be?" To this heartfelt question, dear old Sister Mabel Dukes gently gave this suggestion:

The story is not done. The one you grieve for is safe with Jesus. And for all we know, it was the mercy of Jesus that took her to himself at this time. For all we know, by taking her now, he spared her from some future suffering – from something that would have broken her heart, maybe even from something that would have destroyed her faith, maybe even from some terrible deed into which she would have fallen and hurt others in the course of her fall.

The friends of the deaf man brought him to Jesus and specified a manner of healing:

...they besought him to lay his hand upon him. (Mark 7:32, RSV)

That is not quite what Jesus did. He did not “lay his hand upon him.” Instead he probed his ears and his tongue with his fingers. But he healed him nonetheless.

Bring your petitions to Jesus – even the way and the timing of his salvation. Bring your petitions with all your heart. But in the end, let us repeat the tough words of Jesus in his own prayer in Gethsemane: “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42, KJV). That is, in perfect confidence let us entrust our petitions to Jesus, for he does all things well.

You lame ones shall indeed leap. You who are lame, faint, elderly, or ill: you shall indeed someday leap for joy, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.