

“Modelling Ministry”
Mark 7:31-37 (NRSV)

Soon after my family of origin obtained our first television, I used to enjoy watching one of the early American black-and-white shows which ran from 1959 to 1963 and was called **“The Untouchables.”** It was based on the real life, 1930s adventures of Eliot Ness, an American Treasury Department gangbuster. Robert Stack played Eliot Ness, a squeaky-clean law and order cop, who with his small band of incorruptible agents always won the battle against the worst kinds of people involved in organized crime. (The stories were first written up as a novel in 1947; and later replayed as a full-length movie, in 1987). Crime couldn’t touch these guys. **They were untouchable. They were a breed apart and unreal.**

In our Gospel lesson for today, we learn **it was not like that for Jesus.** Our Lord, **Jesus Christ was “one of us”**; he entered into our time and space and predicament. Previously, in Mark’s Gospel, we’re told Jesus was willing to be touched by others, for example, when a woman suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years approached him in the crowd and touched him (5:25-34), and today we hear that he was unafraid to come into contact with another who needed his compassionate, healing touch.

When Jesus returned to the region of Decapolis, he was faced with **a man in bondage to a terrible physical handicap. The man was deaf and had difficulty with his speech.** Since he “had an impediment in his speech” (7:32) we surmise his condition wasn’t due to a birth defect. But sometime in early childhood he’d lost his hearing – likely through illness or trauma. The handicap was indeed terrible, especially, I should think, in ancient times.

If you or I were given the choice between **blindness or deafness**, the idea of losing our hearing may not seem to be nearly as debilitating as losing our vision. But medical authorities, and the deaf themselves, tell us otherwise. Terrible as blindness is, they do not suffer nearly the social pain and stigma associated with deafness. It’s often hard to get through to these people. And folks often gawk at hearing-impaired people’s appliances, especially if they’re obvious or prominent. Or, if you’re slightly hard of hearing, people may say, impatiently, “Open your ears!” or “Get a hearing aid!” There is also the humiliation of being thought stupid because communication is more difficult. And employment, beyond menial, labour intensive tasks, is often difficult to obtain.

In this case, **the poor man couldn't ask questions, couldn't hear explanations, and probably couldn't read.** Even the truth of the Scriptures was hidden from him. Moreover, I'm sure there were many who attributed his condition to demonization. His situation, to say the least, was miserable and hopeless. He did, however, have some who loved him, and these, having no doubt heard of Jesus' previous healing abilities (cf. Mk. 5:1-13), brought him to Jesus when he returned to the area. And, delightfully, the deaf man and his friends were not disappointed.

Mark was remarkably detailed in describing **the unique process of the man's healing.** Though the account is brief -- just verses 33 and 34 -- it vividly describes **an elaborate procedure.** Jesus "took him aside in private, away from the crowd"; "he "put his fingers into his ears"; "he spat and touched his tongue." He "look[ed] up to heaven"; then, "he sighed and said to him, in Aramaic, 'Be opened.'"

Why did Jesus follow these steps, and why did Mark record them for us?

First, and most obvious, **he took the man aside to avoid the embarrassment that had been the man's lot.** He treated him with dignity. Only a few disciples would be witnesses. Then, because of the nature of the man's handicap, Jesus thrust his fingers into the man's ears. **Perhaps he was using sign language to say that he was going to heal him.** Certainly, he reached out in compassion to him. Further, it is well known that wax can build up in the ears and sometimes this, too, needs to be cleared. Although it may appear unsanitary to us, his action of spitting -- probably the tips of his fingers -- and then wetting the man's tongue was **to indicate that he'd soon be articulate.** Then **Jesus looked upward to tell everyone from where the power to heal was to come.** And his sigh, though inaudible to the man, visibly communicated to everyone else that **Jesus was moved by the man's condition.** And, finally, Jesus' cry, "Be opened!" was the first sound to penetrate the man's ears in years!

Obviously, **Jesus accommodated his procedure to the deaf man's condition.** In doing so, he also focussed on God as the instrument and source of healing. There was no magic here. The healing was divine. But there was at least one other reason for the Lord's elaborate procedure. **He wanted to give us another example of what is necessary to reach a lost world: we can only touch the lives of others if we care for them in deeply compassionate and practical ways.**

Since the healing of the Syrophenician woman (which is told just before this story, in Mk. 7:24-30), **Jesus had ministered in Gentile territory**. Many believe this was for as long as 8 months. Almost a third of Jesus Christ's total three or three and a half years of ministry was devoted to people outside of his own circle of birth and nation. **Alfred Edersheim**, a great scholar of the life of Christ, notes that this and another similar elaborate healing of a blind man (Mk. 8:22-26) took place **during Jesus' Gentile ministry**, showing us how important that ministry was (The Life and Times of Jesus, the Messiah, vol. 2, p. 45, 46). If Edersheim is right, and I think he is, then Jesus' procedure in ministering here provides **a beautiful model for how we might reach out to our lost, postmodern, pagan world**. Christ's look, his sigh, his touch and his word are helpful, powerful symbols for our attempts to reach spiritually and physically needy human beings. My hope is that we will take Jesus Christ's model to heart as we examine the text a little more closely, so his power and peace will flow through us as well.

1. Christ's upward look (Mk. 7:34a).

When Mark tells us, **Jesus "look[ed] up towards heaven,"** we understand the look was a visible indication of **his life of prayerful communion and utter dependence upon the Father**. Jesus was in constant communication with God, whether he was speaking to him or not. To be sure, he got away for special periods of unencumbered prayer, but he was also always in prayer. This was and is the way of Jesus.

Jesus' look up to heaven in the midst of his busy "hands-on" ministry is a powerful message to those of us who lead active Christian lives. We can be so given to meeting the needs of others that we do not take time to pray for them, or for ourselves, and thus deny them, and ourselves, even greater service. We can be so intent on glorifying God at work by doing a good job that we do not glorify him at all. We can be so busy doing good things for our neighbour, community and the church that the upward look is little more than a nervous nod, no real prayer at all. As we minister in God's name we can come to imagine that our service for him is more important than our communion with him. So when we feel there are "not enough hours in a day," we give ourselves to prayer-less work, thinking "God will understand."

Thankfully, mercifully, God does understand, but as **William James** says in the opening quote of **Philip Yancey's** latest book on Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference? (2006), "The reason we pray is simply that we cannot help praying."

We can't do it all. We need God's help.

Prayerlessness is the fundamental sin of the busy Christian. “If we would give sight to the blind, [or hearing to the deaf] we must ourselves be gazing into heaven” (**Alexander MacLaren**). All of us are busy. If we pause for even a tenth of a second at a traffic light turned green, the whole world honks at us. But we always manage to find time for the things we really want to do. Thank God we have made time to pray together this week.

2. Christ's inward sigh (Mk. 7:34b).

Hugh Rudd, a CBS newsman, came home late one night after putting on the CBS late news and was let off by a taxi at his home on the East Side of New York. As he stepped away from the cab, four scruffy-looking youths surrounded him and said, “Give us your money.” He did. Then, for no reason at all, one of them took a pistol and beat him over the head. Rudd fell into the gutter, just a few steps from home. For seven hours on the fashionable East Side of New York, he lay on that street. He was semi-conscious. A whole parade of people went by: people coming home from the movies, plays, parties, what have you; people going out to work on an early shift, milkmen, newspaper delivery carriers, and so on. As they passed him, Rudd kept moaning, “Help me, please help me.” They would quickly look over to where he lay for a moment, then they shrugged their shoulders and looked the other way. His wife, finally worried sick, called the police. They came and found him barely alive at 7 a.m. the next morning.

Compassion and caring was not in vogue in Bible times, and it is no different today. Good Samaritans are the exception. But Mark's record here of **Jesus' deep sigh brings a healing balm, for it is the breath of compassion.** Jesus' sigh comes from his deep feeling for the deaf man, even though he knew exactly what he was going to do to help him in the next few minutes. This is the way Jesus was.

Christ's compassion was part of his healing for the world. Those of us who desire to minister healing in Jesus Christ's name must share his compassion for hurting humanity. All of us have heard stories or seen films about uncaring doctors who will one day need to come to terms with their own humanity. There is a hurting world out there, with thousands who are hurting every bit as much, or more, than this deaf man. And while we will need to come to them with an appropriate sense of detachment to understand and minister to their condition, we must also come to them with a deep sigh.

George Eliot, the Victorian English female novelist who had to disguise her name with a masculine one so as to be more acceptable to her society, once wrote in one of her novels, “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should all die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (Middlemarch, book 2, chapter 20, p. 144). None of us, much less believers, are meant to go through life with dry eyes.

3. Christ’s outward touch (Mk. 7:33).

Our Lord never recoiled from laying his hand on sinful or sick human beings. On another occasion, a man who was “covered with [the effects of] leprosy” (Lk. 5:12) -- he was socially and morally loathsome, physically grotesque -- came and lay prostrate at Jesus’ feet. **“Moved with compassion,” Jesus looked on him as he’d never before been viewed, and the Bible tells us, “he stretched out his hand and touched him...”** (Mk. 1:41). How beautiful Christ is. He could’ve just spoken a word or simply willed that this man would be made well. But he chose to lay his hand on the poor man in front of the critical multitude. The onlookers and the disciples were shocked! According to Jewish custom, Jesus was now ceremonially unclean. To their way of thinking he might have caught the disease.

Why did Jesus do this? There are several reasons. **Reaching out, of course, was the instinct of his loving heart.** But he also wanted to clear away any fears the man might have had. He wanted the leper to feel his willingness and empathy. The touch said, “I’m with you. I think I understand. I feel what you feel.” Those were the human reasons, but there was an overshadowing theological reason. **The touch of his pure hand on the unwell is a parable of the Incarnation.** Jesus took on our sinful flesh, became sin for us, and thus gave us his purity. The apostle Paul once said, “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (1 Cor. 5:21). Jesus Christ took hold of our flesh. He touched us and healed us.

And so, here in this case, Jesus’ handling of the deaf man, his fingers thrusting into his ears, his spittle anointing the man’s flopping tongue, **was instinctive and natural.** It was what he was like. True compassion doesn’t just feel with the feelings; it reaches out and touches someone. **If we are to minister to someone effectively, there must be appropriate touch.** As **Charles Dickens** said so well, “Have a heart that never hardens and a touch that never hurts.”

Truth be told, in spite of the tremendous social concern laid down in the beginning days of the gospel, historically, **this is where the Christian church has often blown it.** The early church was initially more interested in Jewish believers than Gentiles. The established church of the middle ages was more interested in power and position than St. Francis's simple love and concern for the poor. The eighteenth-century English church was more interested in village politics than the social reforms and the message of John Wesley and his "Methodists" or General Booth and his Salvation Army. There is very little effect from any Christian practice that shies away from suffering and pain. The surest way to calcify the heart is to fail to do something when we feel inklings towards compassion. Coldness and hypocrisy can be the result. The crystal "ring of truth" is noticeably absent from such lives.

The hands-on touch is absolutely essential to healthy, authentic Christian faith. That's true for our life together as Christians and for our ministry to others. So I ask, "Are you and I giving time to listen to the needs of others? Have you and I been willing to be uncomfortable to help others? Do you and I ever run the danger of getting dirty in the process?"

Let's bring it all together: **the upward look, the inward sigh and the outward touch.** God's Word is good; God can do it alone. But God has chosen to minister through people like you and me who pray, who are deeply compassionate, and who are willing to get their hands dirty.

Explosive spectacular healing took place, and Jesus couldn't get them to contain themselves. He's done everything well," they said; "he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak (Mk. 7:36, 37).

So may it also be said of us when we touch the lives of others with compassion and care.

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC
July 31, 2011