"A Deeper Miracle" September 16, 2018

Isaiah 35:1-7a; Mark 7:31-37 By Rev. Robert B. Culp

To Hear … Really Hear

Years ago, I was working in our backyard in Ellicott City trying to clear off a bank of weeds that clearly had gained the upper hand in our rock garden.  While I was grunting and yanking and sweating like a dog under the summer's hot sun, our then 6-year-old daughter Bekah arrived on the scene.  She was zooming all around on her tricycle, darting in and around some tools on the grass, when she suddenly stopped. "Daddy! Daddy!” she called. "What honey?"  "Come over here ... right now!"  Helplessly, I muttered something about my need to keep on with the weeding, but she persisted, "Come on, Daddy! Come over here!"  And though I mumphed a bit in protest, I was glad for this interruption.  So I scurried down the hillside and went over to Bekah.

With wide-eyed curiosity, she pulled me down to my knees and asked, "What's that?"  I looked around and said, "What?"  "That!  What's that!"  And then seeing that I didn't have a clue as to what she was talking about, she leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Shh … listen!"  And as I did, I gradually became aware of the cawing of a crow in flight … and the laughter of some children walking to a nearby backyard pool.  And, of interest to Bekah, the hissing sound of somebody's backyard hose.  What to me was so familiar and routine was to our 6-year-old the sound of life hissing and happening all around … wondrous and mysterious.  And I was missing it.

It's funny, isn't it, how this childlike capacity to drink in the wonders of daily life can be blunted or dulled as we become absorbed in the busyness of our daily routines.

Take, for example, today’s story from Mark.  It's a familiar miracle story, well-known from the times of our early awakenings in the Christian faith.  But, you know, there's something about the familiar that can be downright subversive.  It can rob us of the experience of seeing and hearing again the wonders of life as if for the first time.

In this regard, I sometimes wonder if we have really heard the good news Mark is seeking to disclose.

As Mark tells the story, Jesus and his followers are returning from the region of Tyre by way of Sidon, toward the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Decapolis.  Commentators tell us that Mark was somewhat confused with his geography.  Because he was saying in effect that Jesus was going from Sykesville to Baltimore, by way of Washington!  Yet we have no doubt that Mark knew Jesus had crossed over the frontier into Gentile territory.  Jesus was a Jew who, much to the horror of his purist countrymen, was keeping company and tending the needs of outsiders who were to be shunned.  So it was (Mark says) that along the way they brought to him a man of unknown background in one of the 10 cities on the Eastern edge of the Roman Empire.

We are told very little about this man: just that he was deaf and had a speech impediment.  We know nothing of his family background, his medical history … not even his name.  But even so, we know that his world was that of the disadvantaged …he couldn't hear at all, so he couldn’t attend to the sounds of the marketplace happening all around him; he couldn’t hear the sound of his name being spoken, nor the sound of children playing nearby, nor the sound of somebody perhaps whispering her love for him; and not only that …he couldn't speak clearly, and thus his was always a muted response to a glorious sunset, or a sumptuous feast, or even the birth of a child. Just imagine the profound isolation this nameless man must have known.

I think of Samantha, a 10-year-old on a swim team years ago: deaf from birth and only able to give voice to inarticulate sounds.  I was watching her at a swim meet swimming her heart out, focused on the coach for hand signals, and afterwards with animated face and flailing arms trying to join in her team's celebrations.  But invariably, after a while, Samantha would be edged away, and from a distance would observe her teammates.  They gathered closely – their mouths dancing with excitement, tossing their heads back with laughter, giving each other high 5's or fist-bumps.  But somehow they were closing her off, not intentionally, not meaning to harm.  They would just turn their backs, which sadly was something Samantha heard loud and clear.  So routinely, Samantha would wrap herself up in a beach towel and go off alone to her perch on a cold concrete slab in the shadows.

What about you?  Can you think of others like Samantha, wrapped up in whatever brings them warmth or comfort, and finding themselves alone on their separate perches.  Maybe it's a frail arthritic widow confined in her bed by the window in a high rise; or maybe it’s that grisseled soul pushing his shopping cart through the parking lot, looking for a treasure he can retrieve; or maybe it’s a harried young professional commuting on the Metro with a far-off, desperately unhappy look in her eyes.

You know them, don't you? And I suspect you know all about their world.  For if the truth be told, it is our world.  As Robert Bellah has written, in our society today, "We imagine that reality is only us, our own yearnings and cravings … And in such a collapsed world, there is no real speech, because there is no one but us … no one to address, no one to answer …"

So, while Mark doesn't tell us very much about this man in the story, we know him all too well, don't we?  And together with him, my suspicion is that we also know an inarticulate hunger and yearning for what Walter Brueggeman calls "a lost communion … a communion that is genuinely blessed, a communion for which we have been made, a communion from which we may live in freedom."

It was in the midst of that kind of world accented by such a yearning, that they brought this man to Jesus.  What really happened in those moments, God only knows.  It's a wondrous mystery.  But we do know that the man wasn't treated clinically as a “case,” nor was he shunned and pushed away to the shadows.  Rather, Jesus attended this man's needs in a deeply personal way.

He took him aside in private.  He touched him, and praying he cried out, "Ephphatha" ... “Be opened!”  And the man’s world was suddenly changed. He became a new creation: he could hear his own name being spoken, and the joyous delight of folk crowding near.  The fetters on his tongue were released … and he began to speak plainly, expressing thoughts and feelings rooted in an excitement he was now able to give voice to.

The touch of Jesus bestowed upon this man the gifts of hearing and speech, but also something more ... a deeper miracle.  For by that touch, Jesus ushered him out of the silent pain of his isolation and restored him to his place in community.  He was no longer assigned to the fringes.  Rather, he was embraced as one who belonged.

We've sensed that touch in our own lives, haven't we?  And because of that touch, however gentle or dramatic, we have found ourselves being led here to be the Body of Christ.  And as Christ’s Body, we are invited each day to participate in the glorious healing ministry of our Lord.  To be sure, we may not be putting our fingers in people's ears or touching their tongues.  But my guess is that you and I find ourselves drawn to ministries that are every bit as down-to-earth, and relational, and real.

For whenever we help others to hear and be touched by God’s Word, something of the presence of Christ is experienced. Whenever we make the time to be with those who are neglected or forgotten, they may hear afresh the word "compassion" or "community." Whenever we work hard to feed the hungry or provide shelter in the wintertime or minister with others in Habitat, those touched may hear the word "belong" or "home." Whenever we speak up for the rights of minorities or march with them, they may hear the word "justice" or even joyfully experience "love."

There's hint of that joy at the end of our text that Mark gives us in a playful sort of scene.  Do you remember?  Jesus spoke out "Be opened!"  and it was done!  Any power or forces blocking this man off from the fullness of life suddenly dissolved and obeyed Jesus' word.

And then afterwards, the people all around begin to buzz with excitement. They celebrate this man's restoration to health and community. Curiously, in the Gospel of Mark, after such a dramatic healing, Jesus speaks out for the people to be quiet, but they keep on talking!  Jesus orders them to tell no one, but on and on they go.  It's as if …

Jesus says "Shhh!" –  But they speak with greater excitement!

Jesus says "Shhh!" – But they carry on with even greater zeal!

Jesus may have raised his finger to his mouth once more in the scene Mark describes … but then I imagine him dropping it. For I suspect he then spreads his arms wide open and embraces the joyous sounds of God’s kingdom breaking into the lives of all around him, and especially the life of this man.

Let us pray:

O Lord, we praise you that you have done everything well,

even helping us to see and hear like a little child,

even making the deaf to hear and the mute to speak,

even using us to touch others with your life-giving love …

through Jesus Christ.  Amen.