

**We never hear how healed we are--Until we hear the healer out
Mark 7:31-37**

Robert W. Bertram

[Sermon preached at baptism of his granddaughter, September 11, 1988]

Sisters and brothers in Christ, especially our new little sister, Hannah Davis!

There is not going to be a special children's sermon this morning, but later on a child is going to be baptized. Even with the one sermon I am going to attempt, I am going to ask your help, adults and children alike. Several times throughout the sermon there will be this refrain,

We never hear how healed we are
Until we hear the Healer out.

The refrain is also printed in your bulletin. I shall speak the first line and you, please, will answer with the second. Shall we try it?

P: We never hear how healed we are

C: Until we hear the Healer out.

Thank you.

I.

In today's gospel lesson, after Jesus has helped the deafmute, he charges the onlookers to tell no one what they have just witnessed. Why does Jesus do that? Throughout this Gospel of Mark, when Jesus performs a healing or some other mighty work, he regularly does the same thing. He forbids the crowds to tell. Why? He might have known that people would do the very opposite. And they always did, as in our story today: "but the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it." (v. 36) Might that have been Jesus' strategy, a sort of reverse psychology? If you want publicity, pretend it's a secret and people's natural impulse to blab secrets will take over from there. Was that Jesus' intention? No, it was not. There is not a shred of evidence to support that. Jesus evidently meant what he said. Please don't tell. But why, especially since his request was never heeded anyway.

Was it that Jesus was too modest to want publicity? That explanation might come a little closer to the truth, but not much. The truth is, Jesus did not want — not yet! — the kind of publicity which people were giving him, well-meaning as they were. For what they were telling about him was premature, and consequently only part of the eventual story. Because they were telling the story too soon, before it was finished, they were getting the story wrong. So far, all they could see was this charismatic young healer, this wonder-worker who was relieving human misery and hunger and disease. What they had not yet seen, because the outcome of all this had not yet happened, was where all of his healings

and works would get him in the end: crucifixion and, yes, resurrection. But without that climax of Good Friday and Easter, which of course they could not have foreseen, these admirers of Jesus also misunderstood what he was doing here and now in healing the deafmute. By jumping to their own conclusions about this healing, they actually underestimated how healing it truly was. The refrain, please:

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II.

No wonder Jesus seems to have had mixed feelings about doing the healings at all, knowing how they would be distorted in the public mind. Elsewhere in this Gospel according to Mark, Jesus seems actually to resist making healing too extensive a part of his ministry. In today's story, you notice, he does not seek out the deafmute but vice versa. Of course, once he was presented with the poor man's plight, Jesus was not about to turn him down. Certainly not. But even then he makes a point of conducting the cure out of sight of the crowd, not in front of a TV audience of millions "but taking him aside from the multitude privately." (v. 33) Loosing the deafmute's tongue? That, Jesus was all in favor of. But the tongues of the spectators? They did not need loosing, they needed restraining, because they had not yet heard enough of the story to tell it on.

Every new bit of publicity Jesus was getting, was costing him. That was the price he paid each time he agreed to help someone like this deafmute. In return for curing the man, Jesus is rewarded with fame, but that fame -- that dubious fame which actually misrepresented him -- eventually got Jesus arrested and executed. In a way the spectators were only doing what was right. They were giving credit where credit was due. Isn't that what God's law urges us to do, to acknowledge those who do good? Sure, the crowds probably sensationalized Jesus, hero-worshipped him, idolized him. So the same law of God cut him back down. For the religious authorities were getting nervous about him. They saw him as someone who was playing God, a phoney, a blasphemer. How ironic! Here the crowds had been amazed at Jesus' power, his power for instance over deafness and tongue-tiedness. But how about his power over their tongues, his power to control the grapevine and the leaks to the press and the rave reviews, his power over the divine law of public approval and disapproval? On that score he was pretty powerless, wasn't he? At least for the time being he was. It was as if in return for his healing others of their afflictions, it was he who became afflicted instead.

Ah, but that sort of switch -- Jesus' taking the burden himself of those whom he unburdens -- is exactly the whole secret of his brand of cure. That is not just a liability. That is the Good News. That is the Crossing, from our shoulders to his. Notice how he goes about treating the deafmute's ailment. He does not stand over the poor fellow with some magic wand or a laser gun or radiation therapy and zap the ailment from a safe distance. This is not Star Wars. He does not stand aloof and bark some magic Bible passage at the man. No, with his own fingers deep in the man's dead and useless ears and

with his own saliva on the man's slobbering tongue, Jesus identifies with him ever so directly and bodily, almost repulsively. There was no longer any antiseptic space between them. Then, "looking up to heaven," says the text, Jesus "sighed." A better translation would be "groaned," like the thick-tongued, inarticulate cavernous groan of the deafmute himself. The one who was doing the healing was now groaning the groan of the one who was ailing, bearing his ailment with him and for him in order eventually to bear it away. The refrain, please:

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III.

The people of Israel had for a long time been reading in the prophet Isaiah that such a healer would one day come along, a Suffering Servant of Israel who would carry our griefs and bear our infirmities. And now here that healer had finally arrived, in this Jesus of Nazareth. So we Christians dare to believe, we who entrust to him our ills and our death and our sin for Good Riddance. Already in the opening scene of the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus comes to be baptized, then already he appears as the One who takes our lot and makes it his own. In that scene at the Jordan he is not commanding other people to repent and be baptized. That he leaves to his cousin, John the Baptizer. No, Jesus himself gets into the river with the sinners and shares their baptism, as he will in a few minutes with Hannah.

And what Jesus began with his baptism he completed with his death and resurrection. At the grand finale in the Gospel of Mark the dying Jesus on the cross not only groans the groan of the deafmute but he cries the cry of all the God-forsaken and he dies their death with them and for them. That is why, because of his care for the deafmutes and the dying and all God's little ones, his grieving heavenly Father shouts into the sepulchre, into the very stone-deafness of death, "Ephatha," "Be opened." And that opening is not only for the risen Christ but also for all those whose sins he bore and who in exchange receive his Easter life and Easter Joy. Friends, I do not understand that anymore than you do, and there are times when it is almost impossible to hear that much healing, how that suffering servant of Israel could be the One for all us others. Still, I know why the Christian tradition calls that the Delightful Exchange and my students call it the Sweet Swap. The refrain, please:

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IV

Do you know that after all the times that Jesus asked his admirers not to tell, there was finally one time when they were given the opposite instruction: "Go, tell." (16:7) When

was that? Only after the entire plot had run its course, after Jesus had been put to death and after he had been raised, at the site of the open sepulcher on Easter morning. Then at last, but only then, did everything that had gone before make sense. Now was the time, but not until now to go and tell. Until then people were bound to underestimate how big a healing had really been going on all along. Until then all they could see was a deafmute regaining the gift of ordinary speech and hearing. Not that that wasn't a wonderful gift. But if they were not expecting anything better, if they were inclined to think that recovering one's health and companionship is the most we ever dare look for in life, then naturally they could perceive Jesus' cure only superficially and say, "He has done all things well, he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak." (v. 37) As if that were all that is needed, or all that Christ gives.

But now by hindsight, from this side of the cross and resurrection, having heard the Healer out, we can tell there is more to the healing by far. Even those of us who are not otherwise deaf or mute may have an even deeper deafness or speechlessness or groaning which Christ still bears with us and for us, so that we in turn begin not only to hear and to speak but to hear the way he hears and to speak as he speaks. That is how healed we are, once we hear the Healer out.

It is like that with our baptisms, too, which also were acts of healing. There are two ways we can look at those baptisms, shortsightedly or by hindsight from the vantage-point of the Healer with whom we were joined in baptism. Shortsightedly, there seems to have been only that churchly ritual in which we were given our names or inducted into the Christian community. I mean that is all there is to see if we are not used to expecting much from the Healer and are apt to settle for small potatoes. It is like the cynic who said, Why settle for so much more when you could have so much less? But we know better, now that we have heard the Healer out. Being baptized is to be bonded with him, and to be Eastered with him, starting now. Our baptisms were christenings, a word I much prefer to the word "baptism." For there in our drowning and rising with him, we were being Christ-ened, and forever after we have been free to travel under the sign of his cross. If in the Christ-ening this morning you should hear a baby cry, please bear in mind Who else is crying that cry with her and for her. It is almost enough to make us want to say, "Holy Hannah." Instead let us say

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V.

One last word. When at Jesus' empty tomb the witnesses were told to "go and tell," what did they do? Well, first I should remind you who those witnesses were. They were not Jesus' male disciples. Given their track record for getting things wrong, they could not be trusted with such an important message. Instead the charge was given to Mary Magdalene (of current movie fame) and another Mary and Salome. They were the eye-

witnesses, these faithful women, who were now dispatched to break the Good News to the world. How did they respond? Listen.

And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (16:8)

What a let-down! With that dumbfounding thud the entire, suspense-filled Gospel of Mark comes to an end. Not another word.

And yet, no, the gospel does not end there. For how did the evangelist Mark (whoever he was) ever hear the story in the first Place to write it into his gospel? Somehow someone, one of the Marys maybe, eventually must have regained her courage and got her tongue back and blurted out the story's incredible ending. What is even more remarkable is how down through the centuries millions of tongue-tied, scared stiff Christians, male and female, "have said nothing to anyone for they were afraid," and yet the Healer keeps being heard out in spite of them and they keep hearing how healed they are after all. And now I look at tiny Hannah and tremble at whom she has to depend on to have the story told to her, beginning with this vague professor for her preacher, backed up by her uncle and aunt, neither of whom has ever been a godparent before, and by a congregation a thousand miles from where she lives promising to keep her in mind of her Christ-ening. Yet the fact is, here she is, along with her dear parents. Somehow she has gotten this far, somehow we have too, to where the Healer is being heard out after all. I can only say to Hannah and to us all, the Secret must be too good to keep, too good not to be true. One last time,

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9/11/88