

Title: Never Alone in Sorrow

Subtitle: A message of hope and faith in troubled times.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/PDp3iTgCfLI>

Both stories in our Gospel today deal with broken individuals who were in severe distress. Their encounter with Jesus reminds me of an event that occurred in one of my previous parishes when the stain-glass window over the front altar was blown out and laid scattered and broken all over the front lawn of the church due to a hurricane. After the storm blew through, many people from around the neighborhood came together to pick up the broken pieces of glass thrown into the mud, hoping that the stain-glass window could be restored. It was hard to imagine how each piece could be fit back together again until the original master plan for the window was discovered in the church files.

Often when we view difficult Gospel passages, like the one we have today about a desperate Gentile woman with a Syrophenician background, it doesn't easily fit into a modern theological framework. Certainly, Jesus doesn't seem to act in a way that we expect, and it raises many questions.

But if you dig below the surface and think about it, the story is not far from where you and I live. We have many storms that blow through our lives, and when they do, and all hell is breaking loose, it is hard to see how life fits into a Gospel framework. In such moments, it can feel as if God is distant and uninterested.

The Gentile audience, to which Mark's Gospel was written, had a dark and strained history as spiritual *“foreigners and outsiders to the covenants of promise.”*¹ Yet, in humility and

¹ Ephesians 2:12

faith, this woman reached beyond those boundaries and touched the heart of God. Her request was granted only on the basis of grace. She had nothing to commend herself to God except her humble faith. Her story reminds me of a verse from the famous hymn, *Rock of Ages*, which states, “in my hand no price I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.”² This, in a nutshell, was a foundational principle of the Protestant reformation, which Paul expressed in his epistle to the Ephesians when he wrote, “***For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.***”³

When we walk through life’s dark shadows, we can grope for such faith, much like the blind and deaf man in the following Gospel account. The healing of this deaf man with a speech impediment has special meaning for me, for I, too, suffered from a speech affliction from a very young age. It was a heartbreaking, embarrassing infirmity that hounded me for years. But little did I know that grace was waiting to happen. Therefore, the gesture of Jesus taking this man aside in order to deal with him personally and privately, I find to be one of the tenderest, most pastoral moments in all of Scripture.

Imagine, if you will, what it must have been like for this deaf and mute man. The only way people could communicate with him is through sign language. Therefore, every physical gesture Jesus makes tells this man something he could understand.

First, he takes this man away from the crowd, then he put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then he looks to heaven. He sighs, and he says, “Be opened!”⁴

² The Church Hymnal, #685 “Rock of Ages,” words by Augustus Montague Toplady

³ Ephesians 2:8-9

⁴ Mark 7:33-34

Through every physical motion, Jesus begins interacting with this man in the only way that someone who was deaf could understand. Every action communicated something important, like: “Let’s go over here. Don’t be afraid. I’m going to do something about that. Now let’s look to God as he looked up to heaven. Then “he sighed.”

Every detail has a deep personal meaning to me. I remember reading an essay by a speech therapist named William Nuttall, who was himself a stutterer. In it, he pinpoints pretty accurately what I experienced as I struggled with the same infirmity. He maintained that when alone, he had no problem speaking. Only when speaking to other people did he have trouble being fluent? This led him to believe that the social environment of attitudes, evaluations, and opinions – constituted the source of his difficulty.

That is why Jesus physically removes him from such an environment, as he ministered to him personally and intimately. In his identification with this man’s pain, the text tells us that Jesus “**sighed.**”⁵

When I read these words, the picture of Jesus sighing exploded off the page. I guess it is because I have recently done my own share of sighing, especially when I think of tragic events that are presently occurring in Afghanistan or the devastating damage caused by Hurricane Ida here in America. The “deep sigh” that Jesus expressed literally means that he identifies with us in our sorrows as he “groaned with anguish and desire.”⁶

⁵ Mark 7:34

⁶ Strong’s Concordance, #4727 “stenazó” The term “denotes feeling which is *internal and unexpressed*”

The apostle Paul spoke of this sighing. Twice he said that Christians would sigh as long as we are on earth and long for heaven. The creation sighs as if she were giving birth. Even the Spirit sighs as he interprets inexpressible desires and feelings in recognition of the pain that was never intended to be.⁷

As Jesus looked into the eyes of this poor deaf, and speechless man, the only fitting thing to do was sigh. In commenting on this sigh, Max Lucado wrote:

“It was never intended to be this way. Your ears weren’t made to be deaf. Your tongue wasn’t made to stumble. Had Jesus not felt the burden for what was not intended. We would be in pitiful condition. Had he simply chalked it all up to the inevitable or washed his hands of the whole stinking mess, what hope would we have?

But he didn’t. That holy sigh assures us that God still groans for his people. He groans for the day when all sighs will cease - when what was intended to be will be.”⁸

This sigh is the realm where a spiritual “Ephphatha”—which means “to be completely opened”⁹—happens. The grammar in the original text gives an indication of the imperative case. This, too, is a picture of salvation, where God’s kingdom breaks through the darkness of this world with commanding authority. It opens prison doors and sets the captives free, not just from dysfunctional speech but also from sin and the fear of death.

The message of good news that our Gospel contains is what Isaiah accurately predicted when he wrote to a people who were

⁷ Paraphased from Romans 8:22-27

⁸ Max Lucado, *From God Came Near: Chronicles of the Christ*, Copyright 1999 (Thomas Nelson)

⁹ Strong’s Concordance, #1272 *dianoigó* which means “to open up completely”

paralyzed with the fear of foreign enemies. To these, he said, ***“Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear!’”***¹⁰ This is a call for us to hold fast to our faith even when it seems like all hope is lost and God doesn’t care, for we know that those ***“who trust in the Lord shall never be put to shame.”***¹¹ In the end, we shall be able to vigorously proclaim, ***“He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”***¹² Amen.

Reflection Questions:

- What challenges do you face as you try to fit together the confusing pieces of the Gospel today? Are there parallels in it that you see in your own life or in current events that make you feel overwhelmed?
- What does the story of the Syrophenician woman say about the nature of Gospel grace? When Jesus doesn’t seem to respond to events or your prayers in ways that you imagine he should, how do you tend to react?
- Does your concept of grace include the idea that God does not owe you anything – that nothing we can do could earn his compassionate response to us? If so, how does such an idea run counter to the “expected rights” so often talked about in our culture?
- It is hard to keep quiet when we have good news to tell. What kind of joy or gratitude for unearned grace do you have in your heart that needs to be shared?

¹⁰ Isaiah 35:3-4

¹¹ Romans 10:11 NASB

¹² Mark 7:37