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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18B)

September 6, 2015

Text: Mark 7:31–37

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The strangest things happen to Jesus when He's in that region called the Decapolis. This is the area east of the Jordan River and it consists of 10 cities. This region is non-Jewish territory. The majority of the inhabitants are pagan gentiles who didn't give a hoot about Jewish traditions or their sacred teachings. From a Jewish perspective, this was a wild place. And wouldn't you know it, Jesus goes there...twice. He simply will not play it safe. He's the Savior of the world, not just the Jews. He's the redeemer of the wild and the civilized!!

The first time Jesus went to the Decapolis he ran into a demon-possessed man who lived among the tombs, cut himself with stones, and possessed such supernatural strength that he ripped apart the chains the men of the region used to subdue him. Day in and day out, he went about crying out because of his torments. It's truly one of the saddest, most tragic scenes in the Bible. We learn in Mark 5 that Jesus asked the man his name and he replied, "Legion, for we are many." It was the demons speaking to Jesus. The Lord cast them out by the power of His word and the demons went hiding in a herd of pigs nearby. As a result, these terrified pigs ran off a steep cliff into the sea and perished, all 2,000 of them. As a result of Jesus' powerful word, the man, now set free from his oppression, is clothed and in his right mind. These events in Mark 5 are strange, almost uncannily weird. At any rate, the locals asked Jesus to leave. And so He did.

Now we're in Mark 7 and Jesus is returning back to the Decapolis. It was a large area so it's unlikely that the Lord went back to the exact same place. His disciples must have been wondering why He's going back. Demons, pigs, unfriendly Gentiles. Why are we going back? And sure enough, another strange event transpires.

Some people brought to Jesus "a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hands on him" (vs. 32). We don't know who these people were. Did they know about Jesus and His encounter with Legion, that demon-possessed man described in Mark 5? We just don't know. But some way or another,

they know enough about Jesus to ask Him to heal a man who was deaf and couldn't speak properly. "Lay your hands on him Jesus, and he'll be healed."

It's quite remarkable that Jesus never performs His healings in the same way. The details Mark provides are important. Vs. 33, "And taking him aside from the crowd privately..." First of all, Jesus refuses to allow this man to become a public spectacle. How different this will be compared to Legion, the demon-possessed man of Mark 5. That was all out in the open for everyone to see. But not this time. No grand spectacles.

One of the things this teaches us is that Jesus is primarily concerned about the individual person and that person's unique needs rather than the expectations of crowds or other people. The situation in Mark 5 demanded dramatic, decisive action. But even in that case, after the people settled down from the drama of the pigs running off the cliff, the people saw Jesus sitting with the formerly demon-possessed man. Our Lord wasn't interested in the crowd's reaction. He was concerned about this man who had suffered immensely under demonic oppression.

In Mark 7, however, the miracle happens in private. But it too is weird in its own way. Keep in mind, the people who brought the deaf man simply asked Jesus to lay His hands on the man. Simple. No fuss. Jesus had healed Jairus' daughter by simply touching the little girl's hand (c.p. Mk 5:22-23, 41). In this case however, Jesus "put his fingers into his ears (i.e., the deaf man's ears), and after spitting touched his tongue" (vs. 33). Fingers in the ears, spit on the tongue. Strange actions to be sure.

But even those bizarre actions didn't complete the healing. Vs. 34 says, "And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." One Biblical scholar stated that these actions were very common among 1<sup>st</sup> century magicians. Why on earth is Jesus doing these things? Why didn't he simply speak a word of healing or do what the crowd asked for and lay His hands on the man? Maybe it's possible that Jesus was using actions and signs that the deaf man could understand; actions this culture could relate to? We could spend the rest of the day speculating and not come to any absolute, certain conclusions.

What is certain is that Jesus uses His own means and ways to accomplish His good and gracious will. "And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly" (vs. 35). Through the means of strange words and sighs, spit, and fingers, the

man was healed. And he zealously proclaimed the goodness and power of the Lord Jesus.

The Bible provides ample testimony to the fact that God generally works His gracious will through various, tangible means. Moses works the Lord's wonders through his staff. The walls of Jericho come tumbling down my means of marching and the sound of rams' horn. The long-awaited Savior of the world is born through a virgin mother and is raised to manhood by godly parents. The salvation of the world and the defeat of sin, death, and Satan are achieved my means of a real Roman cross. So it should not surprise us that Jesus uses His own spit, the fingers of His hands, and words of His native language to heal this man deaf man.

And it should not surprise us to see that Jesus uses other such earthly, tangible, ordinary things to accomplish His gracious will. In Church and theology, we often talk about the "means of grace." In other words, the ordinary way in which God promises to give us His grace. The means of grace refer to baptism which has water, the Lord's Supper which has bread and wine, preaching and confession and absolution which have a flesh and blood preacher speaking in God's holy name. Through these mundane means, the Lord Jesus builds and strengthens His holy Church. That is, through these means He strengthens you.

Don't you find it odd that the Lord has chosen to use a man from the panhandle of Texas with a background in the geology and no historic Lutheran connections and who had never lived in Nebraska to be a Lutheran pastor in the panhandle of Nebraska and southeastern Wyoming? Consider your won spiritual life...how did you learn about Jesus? Possibly parents who brought you to church. Or maybe it was a friend who told you about Jesus. Regardless of the particulars, the Lord used He own "means of grace" to bring saving faith into your life. Even the deaf man in today's gospel reading was brought to Jesus by a group of people. The startled crowd in Mark 5 knew the demon-possessed man was delivered from his legion of demons because they heard Jesus speak the word and by means of the pigs who went running over the cliff. The Lord Jesus works through tangible, everyday events and persons to accomplish His will.

So, what do you want Jesus to do for you today? What prayer request do you have? The Lord will almost certainly answer that prayer through some visible, tangible means; in many cases, you. You want your family or friends to know and love Jesus? The Lord calls you to tell them about Jesus and to live a life of Christian faith and

devotion. We're concerned about the preservation of marriage as the union of one man with one woman in spite of what our nation's laws say. The Lord calls us to be faithful to His teaching, regardless of the social and political ramifications. Hearts and minds can be changed only by means of His people speaking and living the truth in love. We pray for more youth and young families in our congregation. The Lord will answer those prayers through us inviting them to church, encouraging them to come, assisting them when they do come with their children, being gracious and understanding when their children do what children do – make noise and messes. We want to see broken homes healed and shattered lives restored? To see sinners of every stripe and form to know and experience the love and forgiveness of Jesus? The Lord uses us as His instruments.

The Lord Jesus has promised to be with us and guide us in all things. We are His witnesses and the means by which He will bring the gospel of healing and forgiveness into our homes and communities. And we mustn't forget what happens when Jesus uses His appointed means to accomplish His gracious will, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" (vs. 37). In whatever way Jesus chooses to use us as His means of grace and love, it will be done well, to His glory, to the extension of His kingdom, and to the joy and utter amazement of His people.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.