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By Janet Foggie

Introduction

There are some passages of the bible that become so well-known and worn with use that we cannot read them afresh very easily. Our old patterns of understanding simply come to the fore before we have really taken the story in. These two stories may well come into that category for they are often ones which draw modern readers again and again. Jesus was no stranger to prejudice and understood very well when he was challenging his audience. These stories are both about challenging perception.

In the first a woman speaks, and challenges Jesus' own preconceptions, in the second a man is given his voice and loses a speech impediment, but even when told to keep quiet he could not restrain himself from using this new gift. If then, we think we know what these stories are about, what can we learn from the beauty of the story itself?

Text

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Comment

All stories have a structure, an opening, a setting of the participants for action, the dialogue or actions themselves, a place where there is a resolution or turn in the story and an ending. These two stories could be seen as one, with an hour-glass structure, where the leaving of Tyre is the setting of a second scene. If we read them through again, thinking of the sand running through an hourglass from one tale to the next we see the symmetry in the writing, of the action of Jesus to travel, the coming of an individual, either on her own or brought by others. A difficulty is presented in each case. In the first, Jesus is not presented with the child, she is at home in her bed. The presentation is instead made by the child's mother. There is a distance between the healing and the healer. The distance is important for there is also a social distance, a barrier of people's making, between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.

In contrast, the deaf man with the speech impediment it brought right into Jesus' presence and the disability he has lived with is present in the room. Jesus creates distance by taking him away into a private space, out of the crowd. Contrast is found between Jesus not invading the Syrophenician woman's home, her private space which would have been out of bounds to him, a man and a Jew, and in not parading the deaf man's predicament before the crowd, but instead finding somewhere private to heal him.

These intuitive pastoral judgements show us Jesus' compassion in each case is framed by the needs of the seeker. In the human encounter he thinks of the other. He does not presume that what worked for one seeker will be the right thing to do for the next. The woman is not given an opportunity to thank Jesus, she does not learn that her daughter is healed until she goes home. She has to carry the knowledge of the goodness of God beyond the boundaries of her faith rules and precepts, and we are not told that she goes on to spread the good news of Jesus. It was a desperate need in a hurting mother to see her child healed, the need was fulfilled despite Christ's own initial misgivings, and that is the end of that story, the sand runs through the hourglass of life and we learn no more of either of them. Instead we follow Jesus as he moved on to a place by the Sea of Galilee near Decapolis.

The second half of our hour-glass, though, despite the same structure, has a very different resolution. Here intimacy and distance are reversed as Jesus puts his fingers in the man's ears, spits, and, touches his tongue. Privacy and intimacy are the moments of healing for the deaf man. He is able to speak and not only the deaf man himself but we are to presume the friends who brought him to Jesus, speak of what Jesus has done, and done well.

In the modern church, we are prone to make the approaches to God and the consequences of healing or coming to faith all the same. We press the call to be an evangelist onto every Christian's shoulders in a way that Jesus did not do. In neither story is Jesus looking for publicity or to grow an institution. Instead the beauty of the stories is in relating a good in and of itself. The witness to that event grew naturally from the intrinsic good of the event. And where there is no witness, there is no criticism either.

Response

Why not write a story in two parts, just about the length of these two stories, about modern situations in your own experience where prejudice has been overcome or a healing of some nature has taken place. Think about how the goodness of God can be seen in those situations. Reflect on them, perhaps find a friend and tell them those two stories. How did your friend react?

OR

How can you challenge prejudice in your own community? In yourself? What about getting involved with charities who work in this area in awareness raising and myth busting? Do you hear a call to action in this reading? Identify that for yourself and then act upon it.

Prayer

God of privacy and of public spaces, who draws near to himself those who need help, hearing the plea of the desperate mother, healing the hearing of the deaf man, attend to us now in our need of privacy in a world of noise, touch us in our need for healing, and open our mouths to speak of your glory.

Son of man and son of God,

healer and redeemer,

forever.

Amen