

“Better Than the Disciples”

A sermon¹ by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
January 23, 2022

Did you know that we’re better than the disciples? We obey the words of Jesus better than the apostles and the disciples – those folk who followed Jesus, trying to learn from what he said and how he lived. We must be better than them because we did what Jesus said, and they didn’t! More on that in a moment.

Today’s lesson from Mark’s gospel begins with a great escape. Jesus was worn out by his busy schedule of travel, preaching, teaching and healing. So he decided to go to Tyre, a seaside city on the shores of the Mediterranean. Jesus figured he could get away from the crowds that had been following him wherever he went in the Galilee region. He needed to go someplace where people hadn’t heard of him. Tyre was a good destination because it was a city inhabited largely by Gentiles (people who aren’t Jewish)--although there were some Jews living in Tyre.

Well, apparently the people in the city of Tyre *had* heard of Jesus. They were quite aware of his reputation as a teacher and a healer. In fact, a Gentile woman approached Jesus asking for healing not for herself but for her daughter. What a dilemma: Jesus had tried to go on vacation, yet people wouldn’t leave him alone.

When the Gentile woman asked Jesus if he could do just this one favor for her, he was surprisingly brusque in his answer. In so many words he said to her, “What I have to offer is for the pure breed, the Children of Israel; it isn’t for mutts like you Gentiles.” Yes, the tone of his response is startling – a rather “un-Jesus-like” reaction, don’t you think?

But the woman had startled Jesus, too. You see, in that culture, it wasn’t proper for a woman to approach a man who was a stranger to her. And when Jesus gave her the brush-off, it was absolutely astounding that she didn’t slink away in shame. Instead, this bold, gutsy, devoted mother answered him back: “This gift you’ve been placing on the table for the children of Israel... they aren’t exactly devouring it, are they? And everyone knows that we puppies under the table are entitled to whatever crumbs fall by the wayside. So about my tormented daughter... what will you do for her?”

How about that – she made Jesus think. He thought about other non-Jewish people he had healed. She had a point. Moving beyond his physical exhaustion, Jesus said to her, “Your daughter has been made well. Go, see for yourself.”

The gospel changes scenes. You’ve heard of the “Twin Cities” of Minneapolis/St. Paul, and maybe you’ve heard of the “Quad Cities” of Rock Island, Moline, Davenport and Bettendorf. Well, to the east of the Sea of Galilee there was a collection of independent cities that were commonly referred to as “Ten Towns” – or as they were

¹ Adapted from a sermon originally preached September 10, 2000.

called in Greek, the Decapolis. One thing the towns of the Decapolis had in common was that, like the city of Tyre, their inhabitants were Gentiles, not Jews.

Well, after Jesus healed that woman's daughter of the evil spirit, Mark's gospel describes Jesus and the disciples making a roundabout trip from Tyre back to Galilee through the territory of the Ten Towns. Their route was as indirect as if you went from Cleveland to Columbus by driving through Pittsburgh.

Passing through the Decapolis confirmed that word of Jesus and his reputation as a teacher and healer had spread beyond the boundaries the Jewish world. As in the Jewish cities, there in the Decapolis people brought relatives and friends to Jesus for healing of physical and mental illnesses.

There was one man who was deaf and mute. The crowd begged Jesus to heal him. I'm guessing that they singled him out because, if Jesus could heal him, then they'd know that the power of Jesus was not an illusion; it was real.

Jesus took the man and they went off by themselves, away from the crowd. Mark tells us that Jesus performed some practices common in the ancient healing arts – using his saliva, laying his hands on the ailing body parts, and speaking words of healing. Take note that while Mark originally wrote this gospel in the Greek language, Mark did not translate into Greek the Aramaic word "*Ephphatha*" that Jesus spoke; instead, Mark simply included the Aramaic word "*Ephphatha*" right into his Greek text and then explained to the reader that it meant "Open up!" The reason Mark didn't translate "*Ephphatha*" is because healing words were thought to lose their power if translated; Mark wanted to show that there was power in the words Jesus spoke.

Let's think about this: the man had been enveloped in Quiet. He couldn't hear. He couldn't speak. He was cut off from the world by the shell of Quiet that encased him. Jesus shattered the shell of Quiet: the Quiet Man was freed of his limitations. The wonder of that freeing act pointed to God as the source of power and, consequently, the One to be praised.

But in Mark's telling of this incident, Jesus immediately ordered the people not to tell anyone about what had just happened. Jesus commanded the people to keep silent about what they had just witnessed: the healing of the Quiet Man.

Scholars who spend their careers studying Mark's gospel have come up with a term to describe Mark's strategy in telling the story of Jesus: they say that Mark the gospel writer saw the ministry of Jesus as a "Messianic Secret."

What's the "Messianic Secret?" Mark the evangelist believed that the way Jesus went about his ministry, Jesus didn't want to tell people that he was God's Son sent by God to connect the world with God's will. Mark believed that Jesus didn't want to blow his own horn; he wanted to keep his mission something of a secret so that people would come to discover Jesus on their own and through him would come to put their trust in God.

So, in the gospel of Mark, once Jesus performed a miracle of healing, he told the apostles and the disciples not to talk about it with others. He told the crowd not to say anything about it. But they disobeyed him. Those lucky people, living in the presence of the Son of God, didn't follow directions which Jesus made abundantly clear.

So in that regard we do better than the disciples... unfortunately. I mean, we follow the instructions of Jesus recorded in Mark's gospel: Jesus commanded his followers not to say anything about his power to anyone, and we don't. We don't tell others about the power of Jesus in our lives, even though we know that Jesus is God's own Son!

What are we to make of this "Messianic Secret?"

I wonder if the reason Jesus commanded people not to talk about his miraculous healing of the Quiet Man was because Jesus didn't want people to remain fixated on that miracle. Perhaps Jesus wanted them instead to talk about what God was doing in their own lives.

Maybe that's where this healing story is really headed: Jesus knows that we tend to be deaf to the good news; we tend to remain mute when presented with the chance to proclaim the good news. We are reluctant to accept, believe, and share the good news of God's love given in Jesus Christ; we need to be healed of our hesitation.

I suspect that every one of us needs healing. Perhaps there are some physical ailments we would like healed. But I'm thinking of how much we need spiritual healing. Like the Quiet Man in the Bible story, maybe we need to be healed so we can talk about what God's doing in our lives. We need to be healed of our reluctance to speak to others about what we know: that God entered this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth so that humanity would feel intimately connected to God.

People have said to me, "Jon, you know I like my church, and my faith is dear to me, but I don't know how to share, how to invite someone to experience what I've found."

Don't worry about the particular words you use. Just share what you feel in your heart... thoughts like:

- I'm confident that God is in my life, and it makes my life easier knowing I can confide in God.
- I believe God's with me in the person of Jesus the Son.
- You discover faith's gifts of assurance and forgiveness and hope by welcoming Jesus into your mind, your heart, your life.
- Let him be part of your life, to guide and guard you.

Yes, we need to be healed of our reluctance to speak to others about what we know.

- If you're kept yourself deaf to the call to serve God, may Jesus heal you.
- If you're remained mute when you've had the chance to invite others to join you in serving God, may Jesus heal you.