

Don't Believe the Hype

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Mark 7:24-37

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Though not in the format any of us may have desired, I am grateful to begin my ministry with you in this way, and am grateful to Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary for hosting us and helping Sarah and me record this service for you. I realize many of you are scattered in the diaspora of Hurricane Ida and some remain in New Orleans. Wherever you are, we are grateful to God for the ties that bind us together in Jesus Christ, we hope you can worship with us in this way, we look forward to the opportunity to be reunited together soon, and when the times comes, be ready to help this community get back on its feet in the days ahead. To that end, the Lord be with you...let us worship God.

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴From 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, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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." ²⁸But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

There has got to be more to it. Admittedly that is an emotion, a thought, a feeling that comes across me from time to time when reading these encounters with Jesus and in looking at the people and encounters Jesus has in his ministry. There is got to be more to it than a no-name Gentile woman and her sick daughter and a no name deaf man with a speech impediment. Where are the successes and the people with actual names? Where are the big victories and the gamechangers? And why not show off all these healing powers in front of the crowds? Isn't that the whole point of faith, but to offer an impressive and heroic display in order to gain a big following? Where is that Jesus signature moment? That stadium full of adoring masses with an expensive display and everything choreographed just so...

Instead, we get a Jesus who cares about a bunch of no-names and who, instead of creating hype, not only discourages it and dismisses it, but tells everyone not to tell anyone about what he is up to. Names are important in the Bible...think about it...something happens to Abram and he becomes Abraham...Jacob wrestles with God and becomes Israel. Jesus calls the disciples and we know all their names, even Judas'. Indeed, the God of Israel is known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Important places are also given names: Bethel, Peniel, and one of Jesus' own disciples, Simon, gets a new name, Peter. At Jesus' tomb on Easter morning, we hear names of Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome, who all visit the tomb, find it empty, and become the first evangelists. And Mark specifically identifies them and tells us their names. And in Isaiah 43, God says to Israel, 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.' God, the prophet Isaiah tells us, knows us all and has called us by name. God knows all our names. But here we get none of that...we get no-names, just an anonymous woman with an ethnic background that would not ingratiate herself to Mark's hearers, a desperate woman whose daughter is suffering with an unclean spirit. A daughter who also has no name. After restoring the daughter to the fullness of life, Jesus moves on and encounters another person whose name is also not shared, someone who cannot hear and who cannot speak, and Jesus restores another anonymous person to the fullness of life.

It's just an odd way of presenting us this story...don't you think? Especially with a biblical witness rich with names...why hold back now? And maybe even more curious to us 21st century Americans, why not hype these healings. Think about how many more twitter followers Jesus would have, how much more we could maximize his marketshare, what kind of Internet Influencer he might be if we could hype him. But we don't get names and we don't get hype. I wonder why.

I don't think it is because these people were subhuman or not worth naming. I don't think that is it at all. Jesus would not break all the social mores and cultural expectations by reaching out to them, touching them, conversing with them in the first

place if they weren't worth the trouble. So that's not it. In these encounters, Jesus not only sees their full humanity, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, he returns it to them. The Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter is restored to the fullness of life and no longer afflicted by demons, and the person who cannot hear and has trouble speaking is given the gift of sound and speech. But why do they stay anonymous? Maybe, and this is just a guess, but maybe these events and miracles occurred but the names are not given because the desperate people encountered by Jesus could be any of us. They are anonymous because each one of us are those whose lives are restored by Jesus and who are given sight and hearing and voice by the Jesus' touch. Each one of us are people whose lives are teetering on the brink at any moment until Jesus shows up in some way or through someone and restores our lives. Each one of us may know what it feels like to be a desperate parent worried about our sick child or a person who cannot quite see or hear and therefore cannot live our lives sure-footedly. Maybe their names were not given because all of our names might fit them from time to time. Rather than being anonymous or no-bodies, maybe they could be any of us or all of us, desperate for wholeness, normalcy, and longing to fully flourish in this world. That's why they don't have names, I think. Not because they are anonymous and not worth naming, but because they are anonymous and thus all of us.

I do not know about you, but I do not love functioning in chaos, or at least I don't enjoy it, and we all have experienced our share recently. I don't know if Jesus loves chaos, either, but he always walks right into it, he embraces it, and he makes something more beautiful, wonderful, mended, and whole out of it every time. On top of that, he gives his disciples gifts, things that don't look all that special or hyped or significant, and by his grace those are the things that sustain us and enable us to confess and affirm the faith, pray without ceasing (even in times of trouble), care for each other, and work for the flourishing (not just of ourselves), but of our neighbors and all creation.

So often we go in search of the religious magic pill or special formula or the self-help solution that will finally complete us at Barnes and Noble, and Jesus gives us things that don't seem to amount to much, things like the Apostles' Creed or the Lord's Prayer or the Ten Commandments. I think it is interesting that at the time of the Reformation, the reformers believed and sought to make sure that every member of the Christian community could pray the Lord's Prayer, recite the Ten Commandments, and affirm the Apostles' Creed, not because they were a bunch of religious fundamentalists who believed in indoctrination and propaganda, but because they knew that Jesus does not make us whole with one magic pill or a special shelf in the self-help section, but Jesus gives us a community in which we will have to figure out that sometimes faith will be like the Lord's Prayer and will emphasize our piety and our spiritual life, other times faith will be more like the ten commandments with an emphasis on doing and how we live our lives, and still other times faith will be like the Apostles' Creed, demanding that

we say what we believe and affirm about who God is and who we are in light of God's grace. Our forebears didn't believe faith was just one thing but that it had dimensions and elements of our core beliefs, our most fervent prayers, and our best actions. It's never just one thing...never one formula...never something we possess...don't believe the hype. There are plenty of well coifed religious salespeople who would have you believe otherwise, but our tradition knows that it will be different things at different times and require different responses from us in different moments. And sometimes, it requires all our knowing, all our doing, all our praying, and all our faith, hope, and love. Indeed, maybe these times are some of those times.

Wouldn't be nice if a new pastor could come in and snap his fingers or make some grandiose promises or sell you the solution to all your problems. But Jesus doesn't deal in hype, he deals in faith, in hope, and love. Jesus doesn't swoop in and solve all our problems but gives us, at each step of the way, the gifts we need to persist through our problems in that moment alongside a community of people and problems that he refuses to choose us without. Sometimes through praying, sometimes through doing, sometimes through believing, anonymous nobodies find out that they are just the opposite...fully loved, fully restored, and fully flourishing in this world. We may not always sense its full magnitude, but Jesus brings about restoration anyway, mending what is broken, sustaining us our faith, inspiring us to action, and prompting our prayers...that is not only what gets us through but restores us to a better place, and it's a whole lot better than hype. Amen.