

Cure of the Deaf Man

Sept. 6, 2015

By: James E. Armour, Vice President, Values Integration, HealthSpan Partners

I live in a large city and recently when I was walking down the street, I passed a homeless man propped up against a building; a small, plastic cup in front of him. There was no sign. There was no verbal request for money on his part. He just sat there, blankly staring forward, hoping someone would toss a coin into his dirty plastic cup. He seemed utterly hopeless, almost lifeless as he sat there, the remnants of a life that had certainly been difficult. It was almost as if life had so damaged him that there was nothing he could do at that moment to help himself. He seemed totally passive and unable to even take the first step towards improving his situation.

The deaf man in our Gospel today reminded me of that homeless man on the street. Did you notice that he too seems to be utterly passive in his situation? He doesn't DO anything!

He is completely passive in his encounter with Jesus. "People" bring him to Jesus. He simply allows himself to be brought. Jesus takes him off by himself. He simply allows himself to be taken. Jesus touches and spits and touches again. He simply allows himself to be touched and then touched again.

Even his healing seems to be a passive encounter. The man's ears "were opened" and his speech impediment "was removed." All sorts of things happen around him and happen to him, and he just seems to be silently present and receptive to it all.

What is it that even allows someone to be that passive? As large crowds grab and pull him towards Jesus, you would think he would at least want to communicate with him first. You would think that he would at least want to know a little more about this Jesus and what he was going to do to him. And then as Jesus pulls him off by himself, touches him with spit and looks up to heaven and groans and calls out, you would think – especially since he couldn't hear what Jesus was saying – you would think he would want a little more information about all of these weird things going on!

But he doesn't react. He doesn't demand more information. He simply is present and open to this strange miracle worker in his midst.

Perhaps it was the suffering. Perhaps constantly being called damaged, cursed, and even possessed had convinced him that he truly was damaged, cursed, and possessed. Perhaps his passivity was a reflection of his own self-image, his own self-worth. Perhaps living life on the margins as a deaf man had convinced him that he wasn't good enough to be an active person in the world. Perhaps he had convinced himself that being invisible was a worthy goal for a broken man such as himself.

But Jesus and his healing ministry changes all of that. Through his healing encounter with Jesus, his ears are opened. "Ephphatha!" His impediment is removed and he "speaks plainly." And then he, along with his community, proclaims God's greatness in his midst. In the freedom of being affirmed by Jesus as having full dignity, he can proclaim that dignity however he chooses. There is real power in that.

As I walked by that homeless man that day, busily shuffling to my next meeting, I saw a woman stop to talk to him. I didn't want to stare, so I looked away, feeling a bit sheepish and a bit guilty that I hadn't stopped myself. What was it that she did? Was it a word of encouragement? Was it a few dollars tossed into his cup? Did she escort him to the nearest shelter?

It may have been as simple as meeting his own blank stare with her own gaze of love and acknowledgement.

Whatever she did, it was a Christ-like act. By acknowledging him, she helped to "open up" his ears to the voice of love, however faint, in his midst. And in her own way, that saintly woman affirmed his humanity, his dignity in the midst of a cruel world, and she gave him power by inviting him to respond to that voice of love.

In our own lives, we are invited to reach out to the most vulnerable in our midst. For many, illness, difficult life circumstances, and suffering have caused not only physical, but emotional and spiritual pain as well. Many feel as if they have been pushed to the margins of life and are being punished or cursed.

In our own encounters, we have the opportunity, like Jesus, to "open up" the ears of those who suffer. Perhaps, in the midst of their struggle and brokenness, they are in a unique position to hear again for the first time. We can allow them to experience the reassurance that by our loving words and caring presence, we affirm them as fully human with full dignity and infinite worth. They need do nothing to earn that value.

It is in that simple, loving encounter that healing can begin to take place. And then they can proclaim their dignity however they choose; in the still silence of a confident and

now hopeful passivity, or as the formerly deaf man in the Gospel, in proclaiming God's greatness to anyone who will listen. It is up to them how they respond.

So as we go through this day, let's try to be attuned to the passive sufferers in our midst. Maybe it is someone like that homeless man, a stranger in our midst. Maybe it is a family member or friend, someone whose suffering we have overlooked because of familiarity or ignorance. Perhaps we need to acknowledge our own need for healing.

Whatever the circumstance, let's be active in our search, gentle in our acknowledgement, and loving in our reach. In that way, we can be like Jesus, whose ministry always restored body and spirit, and who affirmed the value and dignity of everyone he encountered.