

Shhhh

Mark 7:31-37; Isaiah 35:1-7

The First United Presbyterian Church of Craffton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit*

[https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/scene1\\_2018-06-10\\_10-29-45\\_t001\\_in1.mp3](https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/scene1_2018-06-10_10-29-45_t001_in1.mp3)

Have you ever noticed while watching a film or television program that oftentimes a subtle shift in the background music will alert the viewer to a substantive change before the characters in the story are aware that such a change is coming? Maybe you're watching *Star Wars* and the characters in the film appear to believe that everything is going well, but then you hear the Darth Vader theme and *you* know that things are going to get dicey; or during a particularly tense moment in an *Indiana Jones* movie you hear the subtle strains of the triumphant theme and you just know that it's going to work out all right for Dr. Jones and his friends.

Mark chapter seven brings us close to the mid-point in the Gospel writer's attempt to give us the Jesus message. While there is no soundtrack for our reading today, there are a lot of clues that indicate that our author is building toward a crucial moment in the narrative. This subtle change is, perhaps, more apparent to those of us who have the gift of hindsight than it might have been to those who are actually living the story.

There is a curious incident reported at the end of Mark 7 that, in my mind, alerts us to the fact that the narrative of the story will be changing. These verses have been the subject of a great deal of discussion in the scholarly and theological community over the years, and I believe that they are of great importance to us as we stand on the brink of a summer

program here in Crafton Heights. Let's look at where Jesus goes, what he does, and what he says.

Our text tells us that Jesus is on the move again – this time, we read that he's leaving Tyre, and he is heading toward the Sea of Galilee and back to the region of the Decapolis. On his way, Mark says, Jesus decides to visit Sidon.

And because we're not from there, that little note just rolls right past us. Jesus is a grown man. He can go where he wants to go. But imagine if you asked me for a ride downtown and the Arts Festival today, and I said, "Hey, sure. I'm happy to take you to the park. On the way, though, I've got to swing past the airport and then pick up a buddy in Cranberry Township.

If you know anything about the geography of our region, you'll roll your eyes at me and say, "Come on, Dave, those places are hardly on the way to town. In fact, they're the exact opposite!"



But that's what Mark says Jesus is doing here. In order to head southwest, he first goes due north, then due south, and finally to the west. It's just ridiculous and inefficient.

In fact, many scholars have looked at this passage as bona fide proof that Mark didn't know what he was talking about. Clearly, the author is an idiot who is unacquainted with the area about which he's writing, these folks would say. Nobody in their right mind would travel from Tyre to the Decapolis and say that Sidon was "on the way". That would add weeks, if not months, to the journey.

I would respond by saying that clearly these scholars are not well acquainted with the ways of Jesus, who, when given half a chance, always seemed to take the slow way, the long route, and the back door. After all, this is the same man who preached love for the enemy and the power of yeast and seeds, who reached out time and time again to those who had been forgotten or abused by the powers that be, and who proclaimed that the ultimate power of God is best demonstrated in submission to torture and death on a Roman cross. I have absolutely NO problem believing that Jesus thought that the best way to get from Tyre to the Decapolis was to go through Sidon. It's one of the glorious inefficiencies that makes sense in the Gospel economy – but is hard to sell in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For instance, last week Marla and I got into a car with McKenna and Lindsay because we had some questions about the upcoming Youth Group mission trip to the Seneca nation of Indians in Western New York. We drove three and a half hours for what turned out to be a 45 minute meeting. On the surface, that's a bad choice, right? Four fairly gifted, very busy people, spending seven hours in the car to do what one might think could be accomplished in a phone call and a couple of emails? When we got back to Pittsburgh that night, every single one of us thought we had made the exact right choice – spending the day in the car was the only way that we could lay eyes on our work site, shake hands with our hosts, and begin to dream a little bit about what that week might look like.

In seeking to be followers of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we could all learn a little bit from this messiah who often chose the slow, indirect route. Parents: let me encourage you to put the phones down, and to allow the dishes or laundry to pile up just a little bit longer. I'm here to tell you that while

some of the days may seem incredibly long, the years are oh-so-short.

Cross Trainer staff, as you try to fit everything into a brief summer camp, let me remind you that the ultimate goal of this experience is love – and that love is a most wildly inefficient yet ultimately amazingly effective practice in changing the world for young people.



That's where Jesus is going. What does he do when he gets there? I'm not sure if you were really paying attention at all, but this is an incredibly weird healing story. Did Jesus really give the man a "wet willie" in the process of this healing miracle? No, no, the text clearly indicates that he didn't spit on his fingers until after he removed them from the man's ears... he didn't spit on his fingers until he went to touch the man's tongue...

Seriously, what's up with this healing story? Just a few verses ago, we heard of a young girl who was plagued by an evil spirit, and Jesus wasn't even in the same neighborhood as she – and yet he granted her healing. In today's reading, though, there is a multisensory healing with many stages. It would appear to be, at the least, another example of the inefficiency of Jesus.

I'd like to invite us to pay attention to a single word in our Greek text this morning. The word is *mogilalon*, and it's translated as "could hardly talk" in the NIV, and as "speech impediment" in other versions. It is a peculiar word that indicates that the sufferer has difficulty speaking. I find that curious, because in the bibles that have topic headings, and when we talk about this miracle, we often see this as "the time that Jesus healed the deaf-mute." That's not true.

*Mogilalon* is not the word for “mute” – it means something different.

Jesus meets this man who is afflicted with *mogilalon* and engages him fully. He touches him, he uses the most basic of his own bodily fluids by spitting into his hands and touching the man’s tongue and in so doing frees the man to hear and speak well.

The word *mogilalon* is used only one other time in the Greek translation of the Bible: that comes in our reading from Isaiah 35. Because this word is so unusual, and because it only occurs one other time in the Bible, I’m suggesting that Mark chose to use it intentionally so as to remind his readers of the context of Isaiah 35. The Old Testament reading you heard earlier is an amazing passage about the real presence and reign of God. The prophet has spoken at length about God’s promises to come and dwell with his people and to bring about the ultimate healing of the world. In answer to the question, “when will this happen?”, he says, “look for these kinds of things: the opening of blind eyes, the unstopping of deaf ears, and the freeing on tongues that are *mogilalon*.”

Way back in chapter 1, Mark told us that Jesus was *preaching about* the nearness of God’s kingdom; now here in chapter 7, he is demonstrating that kingdom.

For me, that begs the question: how am I not only talking about and preaching about the intentions of God, but living them in the world today? None of my words – and none of yours – mean a blessed thing if we are unwilling not only to *talk* about loving our neighbor but to actually demonstrate in the lives of our neighbors the care of God.

So after Jesus gets to where he’s going and does what he’s been asked to do, he speaks to those who have

gathered. Specifically, he tells them, “shhhhhhhh. Don’t tell anyone what you’ve seen.”

This is a prime example of what we can call “the Messianic secret” in the second Gospel. Time and time again Jesus does something amazing and then says, “Look, let’s keep this amongst ourselves, OK? No need to go telling everyone...”

Again, this is a great example of Jesus acting in ways I would not. I mean, seriously, if I did something like that, I’d be tempted to tweet about it, post it on Facebook, and call the newspaper. And if, in a burst of modesty, I actually refrained from doing any of those things, I’d hope that *you’d* do that stuff and tag me in it. But Jesus does not. He discourages the disciples from publicizing this stuff at this point. Why? What is the point of this secret?

Could it be that here, Jesus is saying to his followers, “Look, fellas, you don’t know the whole story yet. Don’t try to talk about what this means because you don’t really get it – all of it – yet. Right now, your speech about me is about as accurate and helpful as this guy’s recitation of the Gettysburg Address half an hour ago. You can make some sounds, but you can’t really get the whole message out because it’s still unfolding...I’m afraid that you might have spiritual or theological *mogilalon*...”

Sometimes, an incomplete message is less helpful than no message. As we prepare to engage in the work of ministry this summer, let us be slow, and be active, and resist the temptation to make global pronouncements. Instead, let us merely point to the things that we *can* see and invite the people who are around us to make connections in their own lives.

As I indicated in my comments at the beginning of this message, the feeling in the text is that there is something more, something substantive to come. Clearly, for those of you who are being commissioned as Cross Trainers today, there must be a feeling of anticipation and maybe even some anxiety. We are on the brink of something... and we might know something about it, but I guarantee it will be different from what we expect in many ways.

My deep hope and prayer as we stand on this tenth day of June in 2018 is that we might see ourselves in every aspect of this passage. May we be willing to stick with Jesus even as he takes what seems to be the longest possible way around... may we be willing to allow him intimate proximity to our very selves so that we are better able to perceive his action in the world... may we be able to speak of what we know even while we wait for what we don't know... and may we be willing to live the faith such a way so as to be a blessing to the ones God has given as our neighbors.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.