



The Trinity Pulpit



Discovering Others Along the Way

Mark 7:31-37

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You and I see them everyday, but we really don't see them. There is a big difference between noticing someone and seeing someone. We notice them with a glance or a stare. It may be their appearance, tone of voice or situation, but we notice them. We notice that they don't fit into their surroundings and for sure don't fit into ours, or we notice that they fit all too well into our surroundings until they simply disappear among the other faces and noises of our routine. They are the people we notice but do not see. The song "People Need the Lord" starts with the observation "Everyday they pass me by. I can see it in their eyes. Lonely people everywhere going who knows where." We notice them, but we do not see them. How do we discover others along the way as we embrace our journey with Christ?

Last week we talked about who we should take with us on our journey. We thought about those we must embrace such as our family, community and church family. We considered the importance of choosing those who we can influence and who will influence us. But this is a different undertaking. This is not about the choosing of those we know, but it is about noticing and discovering those who God places in our path on this journey.

In our text we just get some bare facts about an event in Jesus' life. Jesus is traveling from Tyre to Sidon and then to Galilee, or the area of the Decapolis or the ten cities. As he is traveling, a crowd brings to Jesus a man who could hardly talk and was deaf. They begged Jesus to lay hands on the man to heal him. Jesus takes him aside to perform the miracle. With Jesus' touch and prayer the man is healed. Jesus warns the man not to speak of this miracle, but the more he begs them not to speak, the more they begin to speak of what Jesus has done. We are told the people were amazed because Jesus did all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.

It is just one of many moments when Jesus touched someone and they were healed. It is just a small insight into a moment when Jesus made all the difference in the life of another. We have many comments in the gospels about how they brought those who were sick and diseased to Jesus and he healed them. In this story, we get a small insight into such a moment. We get to watch Jesus at work. We get to see how he responds to another. We get to learn of the response of those around him. However, for our reflection I want us to discover what this text might say about how Jesus discovered others on the way in his own life.

I have long struggled with the model of Jesus' ministry. There are times I believe the Bible teaches that Jesus was very intentional to where he was going and what he was going to do. It seemed that each moment and day was completely planned and that there were no surprises or moments of just reacting. Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus and his moments preparing for the final Passover and the events of the Passion Week are just a few of the pictures we get from scripture where Jesus' life is very planned with great purpose.

However, there are other moments when Jesus seems to be reacting. As people push in around him or his home synagogue turns against him or in a story like this one and the one prior to it where someone comes begging for a miracle and a need is presented. Did Jesus expect this today? Was he traveling from Tyre to Sidon then to Galilee with the plan of finding this deaf and mute man? This passage gives us some insight into Jesus' model for ministry. Was it intentional or was it a Godly response in the routine? It seems to me that these two views do not have to be exclusive of each other. Jesus' life is filled with moments when there is this grand plan and I believe there were moments when he

responds to the need he discovers. Our text gives us some insight.

First, to discover others on the way means to live a life with an intention of seeking others. We are told that Jesus went from the region of Tyre then to Sidon and then to Galilee. Now we might miss this important comment without a map. But to go from Tyre to Sidon to Galilee is like, as one writer puts it, to go from New York to California by way of Boston. It is to go from Raleigh to Fayetteville by way of Wake Forest. It is to go a complete other direction than one's destination. Some have suggested that Mark simply did not know his geography, but I don't think that to be the case. I think what we have here is a direct decision of Jesus to seek others along his way in ministry. This whole chapter is the inclusion of gentiles into the ministry and purpose of Jesus' life. The chapter begins by Jesus' having conversation with the Pharisees who were arguing over what was clean and unclean in regards to eating and the dietary laws of the Jewish people. The Pharisees had found their standing with God in keeping their laws. In contrast was this woman who was Greek and Syrian Phoenician. Her response to Jesus was based on humility and faith in what God could do. Jesus has included those outside the nation of Israel in his mission in Mark 7. The inclusion continues in our story. Jesus travels through Sidon and then to the Decapolis. In this around-about adventure, Jesus has intentionally traveled to places where he would have encountered Gentile people and people from various races and backgrounds. His ministry would not be limited to only the Israelites although he had come to fulfill their laws and the promise of God to them. Jesus chose to be intentional in his journey to encounter those who others had already excluded from God.

So, the first thing we can say about discovering others along the way is that there are times in our lives when we must intentionally put ourselves in places and situations where we will discover others in need. This might mean to break our routine and go on a mission trip. It might mean to break our routine and serve at North Raleigh Ministries where we will encounter some of the forgotten in our own community. It might mean to venture off our floor at work or away from our friends at the cafeteria at school. There are times that we must be intentional if we are going to discover others on the way.

Yet, I think that this text also tells us that part of this

discovery is to be prepared when we are surprised. When Jesus comes to the Decapolis there is a crowd that brings to him a man who is mute and deaf. Had Jesus traveled all this way for this encounter? I don't think so, but I do think that his intention of being God's presence wherever he was meant that he was ready to respond when this man is presented to him.

The truth is that most of us day to day cannot take the time to venture far from our routine. We have tasks to perform, a job to do, and responsibilities that must be completed. There are some moments we can break our routine, but most of life is going to be spent in routine. So, how do we discover others along the way in our routine? It is the practice of being present to God throughout our day. If we can find a way to be present to God throughout our day, then we can discover and respond to the needs of others as they are presented to us.

In his book on prayer, Richard Foster encourages us to learn what he calls the Prayer of the Ordinary. He suggests that most of us have relegated our spiritual life into a few moments of the week and a few actions of the day. He writes, "The scandal of our Christianity is the heresy of a five percent spirituality." He believes that we overcome this heresy in our lives by doing three things. We must turn ordinary experiences into moments for prayer. We must see God in ordinary experiences, and we must pray throughout the ordinary experiences.

The suggestion of Foster is that we must learn to become aware that the ordinary is where God is found. Foster writes, "The discovery of God lies in the daily and the ordinary, not the spectacular and heroic. If we cannot find God in the routines of home and shop, then we will not find him at all..." Thomas Merton urges us to have an "unspeakable reverence for the holiness of created things." (*Prayer*, Richard Foster, p.171)

The ministry model of Jesus is to be intentional and deliberate in being the presence of God each day and in every moment. When we begin to pray about people around us and the routine of our lives, all of a sudden the people we notice become people we see, and we discover others along our journey.

A second thing we learn about Jesus in our text is how he responds to those he discovers along the way. The crowd brings the man to Jesus and begs for Jesus to lay his hands on him. However, Jesus



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will not treat this man as the next one in line. He will not be drawn into someone who is manipulated by the demands of others. Jesus will not be reduced into some magic genie for our use or a side medicine show. We are told that Jesus takes the man away from the crowd before he does anything else. The first thing Jesus does when he discovers others along the way is that he treats them as individuals and not as a number.

We have a hard time separating people from stereotypes when it comes to even our best actions of compassion. When we refer to others, we group them into categories. We speak of the poor, the sick, the sinners, the addicted, this nation, this race, that nationality, this age group or even the world. In these designations, even in our best intentions, people lose their individuality. We forget that we are all created fearfully and wonderfully by God. Now to be sure there are some systemic issues in our community, nation and world that effect whole people groups, but in our routine we don't encounter people groups, we encounter individuals. Jesus took the man away from the crowd. It's almost as if Jesus is saying, "Treat people as individuals not as cases, as individuals not as people groups." To see instead of notice we must discover an individual.

The next comment we have about Jesus is that he sighed. This is an odd statement. There are many ways to look at this sigh. It is not a sigh of disgust. It is not a sigh of frustration. It is more a sigh of sympathy. The word means a long groan. Scholars suggest that the word might be that of anger at the man's condition. There is an acknowledgement of Jesus that in God's creation this was not the intent. People were not created to suffer, but in a fallen world suffering was real. Jesus sighed. I think it is a holy pause. I think it is a moment of focus by Jesus. The demands of the crowd and day have brought Jesus to be alone with this hurting man, and before there is a miracle there is a holy pause. What I think this simply means is that in this moment Jesus became focused on this man, his need and God's presence in this moment.

If we are going to discover others on the journey, we must learn to practice the holy pause. It is to slow down for a moment and listen to another. It is to take the time to really hear the pain of a friend. It is to pray the ordinary and ask to witness God's presence in a moment. It is to focus our thoughts and energy on someone else even if it is for only a mo-

ment. Jesus sighed. There was this holy pause as he became focused on the need of another.

Jesus' last action with the man is to heal him. We must not miss the details that Mark gives us. Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears. He spit and touched the man's tongue and he looked to heaven and prayed that his ears be opened. As we try to piece together these actions, this is what we know. The act of placing his fingers in the man's ears was an indication that he was going to help the man. In some ways it was sign language. This act was giving the man hope that Jesus was not going to pass him by like others may have done in the past. This journey to Jesus was not going to be empty. Jesus was going to act. Jesus spit and placed the spittle on the man's tongue. Now to be honest, that sounds somewhat disgusting to us. But we do not understand the nature of medicine in Jesus' day. Spittle was believed to have medicinal properties. We find Jesus in other instances making mud from saliva and using spit to heal. Spittle was used by healers in Jesus' day. It was seen as medicine. So, Jesus conveys his concern and his intent to act. He uses spittle which indicates medicine or a natural healing and then he looks to heaven and prays for the man's ears to be opened. We must not underestimate what this event tells us about how God works in our lives and the lives of others.

We all know about people who have been healed miraculously. The doctors said one thing, but that is not what occurred. When everyone else had given up, God did something no one expected or even hoped. Miracles occur, but my experience has been that most of the time God works through a combination of divine power and human initiative. In most cases, the people I know who have overcome trouble, whether it is physical, material or spiritual, have done so by God's guidance and human involvement. If it is healing, it is the power of God and the power of medicine. If it is hunger, it is the power of God and the generosity and compassion of others. If it is loneliness, it is the presence of God and the presence of community. God, most of the time, chooses to work not alone but with us.

John Ortberg tells the story of a pastor who was struggling with a hidden sex addiction. He felt ashamed and embarrassed by the fact he continued to minister, yet feared that one day someone would know his thoughts and his practices. Finally, his guilt became so great that he checked himself into a



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hospital for help. As part of his therapy he was to meet with others and they would share their issues and find help together. This pastor could never tell his story. He was happy to help others, but he just could not confess. Then one day it happened. He confessed his own addiction, and in fear and shame he was afraid to look up. Finally, he looked up and around the room, and he did not find condemnation but love and compassion. Ortberg writes that the man's addiction was broken that day. It was broken by the power of others who showed compassion. There was still much work to do but that moment in the grace of God and the involvement of others a life was being changed. Jean Vanier writes, "A community is never there for itself or its own glory. It comes from and belongs to something much greater and deeper: the heart of God to bring humanity to fulfillment. A community is never an end in itself: it is but a sign pointing further and deeper calling people to love." (*Everybody's Normal Until You Get To Know Them*, John Ortberg, pp.53-54)

God has, since the very act of creation, chosen to achieve his purpose through those he created. The purpose of God is a divine and human enterprise. If we are going to discover others on the journey, then we will see them as individuals, focus ourselves upon their need and realize that to meet that need it will be a divine and human endeavor. It will require the power of God, and most of the time it will require our involvement.

One last thought and that is the purpose for discovering others is to bring God glory. Our story ends with a strange twist. Jesus commands them—meaning the crowd—not to tell anyone what he has done. Now this seems odd to us, but Mark's gospel is filled with such comments that scholars refer to as the "secret messiah." There are many times that

Jesus tells them not to tell anyone when something has taken place. There are many reasons this secret might be needed. It might be that Jesus did not want his messiahship misunderstood. Mark's contention in his gospel is that Jesus is not fully understood until the cross and resurrection. Everything must be filtered through that event. It might be Mark's way of showing that Jesus' messiahship was not something he had created but was evident by Jesus' words and actions. Whatever the case, the reaction is interesting. The more he told them not to tell, the more they kept talking about it. In other words, when God changes a life you can't keep it quiet.

There are many people and organizations that notice others in this journey of life. There are many who care about the well being of those they know and those who they have never met. To care about others is not strictly a Christian quality. However, there is a difference in how we care for others and how a charity group cares for others. We do so because in them we see Jesus, and when we respond to them we are acting as Jesus and when their need is met then Jesus is glorified.

"Everyday they pass me by. I can see it in their eyes. Lonely people everywhere going who knows where."

Will you discover others in the ordinary? Will you not simply notice them but see them as individuals God loves? Will you take that holy pause to discover their need? Will you seek God's guidance and be willing to be used by God? Will you give God the glory? As we embrace the journey with Christ there is always room for others we discover on the way.

