

November 15, 2015 (Full Inclusion Sunday)

TEXT: Mark 7:31–37

TITLE: Breaking the Silence

There is something powerful in witnessing someone hearing for the first time—or hearing for the first time in a long time. What they experience is written all over their faces, as they nod that a sound has broken through the silence at last – that they can hear the words spoken by someone else—that they can hear their own voice once again. Cochlear implants and other modern technology have made these types of healing possible today. But they still seem like miracles. They call to mind the stories of the bible—of blind Bartimaeus suddenly able to see the face of Christ, or of the deaf-mute man in Mark’s gospel suddenly able to hear the voice of Christ and tell the world the good news of his healing.

But what the videos don’t show is what comes next—the process involved in moving from deafness to hearing. People who’ve received cochlear implants have written about being startled by a wide range of noises: background noises like air conditioning, the crunch of gravel underfoot, the sound of paper rustling, crickets chirping, police sirens. We are used to walking in a world of surround-sound. But for the newly-hearing, they have to get used to noises of life that are all around them and re-learn how to fit into a world of sounds.

I read a review of a book called “Shouting Won’t Help: Why I—and 50 million other Americans—Can’t Hear You”; it noted that “hearing is our fastest sense. It connects us with our environment faster than sight, smell, taste or touch.”¹ The reviewer went on to quote Helen Keller, who is America’s best-known advocate for what it means to live with disabilities. Keller always considered deafness to be a much worse misfortune than blindness, because while blindness cuts you off from things, deafness cuts you off from people. To hear sounds means you can hear language; you can respond to stimuli quickly; you can know when your child or loved one is calling your name. The people in the video we saw just now wept tears upon hearing for the first time, not so much because of the physical change, but because they were able to hear the sound of their parent, spouse or child - and because they were hearing their own voice again, proving on some deep level that they truly existed, that they truly belonged. One deaf young man wrote that with his implant, he “was finally a real human instead of a guy who ‘ignores’ you if you’re talking to him from across a room.”

On this Sunday we lift up the importance of inclusion and largely consider the topic through the lens of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community’s experiences. The word “inclusion” is OK, but not perfect. We can “include” people and still not have them truly “belong.” We can name “diversity” as a goal, and yet do little more than give the topic lip-service or check off a box about whether our company had “diversity training” this year. We can use the words “equality” and “justice” a lot, but sadly it is rare to live into the full meaning of what these words truly demand of us.

For true healing and full inclusion to occur, two things have to happen. First, there has to be a space for stories to be shared. A safe space—a place where those who have suffered or been marginalized can tell their story to others who are receptive, caring listeners. Every gay or lesbian person has had to come out to someone, has had to break their silence at some point. Perhaps even more difficult is when a transgender person decides to name the truth that the gender with which they present themselves to the world is not the gender identity they know best coincides with who they are. To share that story is to be incredibly vulnerable and potentially confront major obstacles from the culture at large. And for bisexuals, the challenge is made doubly difficult, because they risk rejection from both gay and lesbian friends and heterosexual friends. If they act on an attraction to the opposite sex, they can be accused of trying to “pass” in a heterosexual world; if they act on same gender attraction, their identity is narrowed to categories of homosexuality. So the first step toward an inclusion that is truly just and faithful is to provide a safe space for stories to be told and gender identities to be openly articulated.

Second, inclusion and diversity are not just categories we note on statistical reports. They both require full parity in participation—that there is not a hierarchy placed on whose needs come first, who gets to make decisions, and who gets to be compensated most generously. For the LGBT community, this means that their sexual identity cannot be grounds for denying basic services, housing, or secure employment. But faithful non-discrimination and full inclusion goes beyond even that. Think about where you work: Who gets to make the decisions? Is there parity and diversity around that table or only a hierarchy of privilege—and if we’re being honest, a hierarchy of white, male privilege? Think about the community where you live: Is there diversity and inclusion in your neighborhood: Are the gifts of all people celebrated in our sports, in our cultural activities, in our government? Think about the church as a whole and even our congregation: Are we truly just in welcoming people to worship Christ or do say “all are welcome” so long as they adapt to our liturgy, our hymn choices and our committees structures?

My goal here is not to be overly critical. My goal is to remind myself and all of you how broad the goals of inclusion truly are. When we’re told about the deaf-mute man in Mark’s gospel, the author first stresses geography. He describes how Jesus left the regions of Tyre and Sidon and went toward the region of the Decapolis. Those details are important since it means that Jesus did this healing outside Jewish territory. He touched and healed and blessed a Gentile, an outsider. We’re also told that friends of the deaf man brought him to Jesus, advocated for him, begging Christ to lay hands on him. The work of inclusion doesn’t rest on the shoulders of those already pushed to the margins; it rests firmly upon us, we who are called to break our silence and speak up for any who have been unjustly excluded.

After the healing, Jesus tries to keep this miracle under wraps. He doesn't want the world to herald him as a miracle-worker, but rather to know him as a servant whose authority comes not from self-promotion, but from suffering. He will not be a Messiah wearing a gold crown, but rather the one bearing a wooden cross. But as soon as Jesus heals him, the former deaf-mute can't help himself. His friends can't stop themselves from leaping for joy and telling the good news of what they've just seen. Look, we are all emotional and empathetic creatures. We see women and men weeping as their hearing is restored at last and we tear up. We see babies smile and toddlers wave their arms with joy at having their deafness cured and we can't help rejoicing with them.

For centuries, we have described coming to faith in Christ as a type of healing; a breaking free from chains that have held us down; a stepping forward by faith into a newness of life—where we're not defined by sin, by inability or disability, or by the world's hierarchies of value. Often coming to faith is a moment of joy. Often it is something that we hold onto and cherish and celebrate. But this moment of coming to Christ was never intended to be an individual moment, a merely private event. In the video we saw, the mother wept at hearing again because she heard her husband's voice and heard her child call out to her. The little boy celebrated because he heard his parents say his name. In fact, the entire group gathered in those medical offices wept and celebrated—for the deaf could hear; they all could hear one another.

That was true for the deaf-mute of the Decapolis. He rejoiced along with his friends. That is also true when we work for inclusion and justice. We are enriched as we create safe spaces for others' stories; when we advocate for healing and hospitality; when we share our privilege, when we step back and let others decide, when we become a diverse, patient, listening, hearing and caring community.

I'm not proposing a Pollyanna spirituality here. I'm fully aware of the brokenness of our world: the recent attacks in Paris, the continued refugee crisis in Syria or Central America, the number of gun deaths and domestic violence in Pittsburgh. In choosing how to respond, should we opt for violence, isolation, xenophobia, and fear; or should we call for justice, inclusion, and true freedom of religion? We've seen the results of the former choices far too frequently. Christ calls us to a new way of living—of opened ears and hearts, of inclusion, justice and community. Today this happens far too seldom—which is why it ends up being captured on short YouTube videos. But when it does happen, it is a God-blessed thing. It brings tears to your eyes. It lifts your spirits. In those moments, we can't help but break our silence and tell the good news of what Christ has done for us, with us, together.

Inclusion, diversity, equality, justice, healing, welcoming, community, faith: Call it what you will. More important, picture how it can be—with Christ and one another. And go, by grace, to make it so. AMEN.

¹ Seth Horowitz, *New York Times Book Review*, March 3, 2013; book by Katherine Bouton.