

“Have You Ever Experienced Compassion Fatigue?”

Mark 7:24-37

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I miss Mother Teresa. She died nine years ago and the void she left is enormous. No one fought harder for the dignity of the destitute throughout the world. She established 517 Missionaries of Charity in over 100 countries and their purpose was to care for the hungry, naked, homeless, crippled, blind and lepers. By doing so, she made the world look at what it was trying to ignore, the unwanted and unloved. For almost fifty years, she was the voice of the voiceless and advocate of the powerless. In my opinion, she was the clearest picture of Jesus I've ever seen.

She also embodied the message of our text today and I understand it better because she lived among us. Let me show you what I mean.

I am intrigued by Mark's placement of these two stories in his account of Jesus' life. Why do you think Mark connected them? Surely one does not lead into the other merely because they focus upon two miracles that occurred in Gentile territory. Let's dig deeper than that.

Could it be that these two stories are connected because in each story someone had to speak for the person in need? A young girl's mother had to be her voice and a group of people had to speak for the deaf and dumb man. *Without help, neither victim's circumstances would have changed.*

Perhaps this is the key to understanding these stories and identifying the task of the church. **The church is to speak for those that have no voice in order to make their lives better. Without our voice, they have no hope.**

There are two groups of people in the world. One is people in need that can speak for themselves and get help. They have adequate resources and opportunities to obtain what is needed to improve their situation. This group has hope for a better day.

The other is composed of people that have no hope for change because they have neither resources nor opportunities to improve their lot in life. For the most part, they are unnoticed and unloved. No caring community embraces them or listens to their story.

Who are they? They are abandoned children in Senegal, orphans in Siberia, the starving masses in Sudan, AIDS patients in Africa or political prisoners suffering under repressive regimes. Closer to home, they are abused children or battered wives in our neighborhoods, the working poor that skip meals to make ends meet or the sick that have no medical insurance. They are the undereducated that cannot find employment, the immigrants that cannot speak English or the neglected senior adult that has no family.

Society is not tuned in to these people. They have no voice or when they speak, no one listens.

Isn't it the role of the church to find these people and speak for them? I think so. As a matter of fact, I believe the message behind these two stories is this. If we have food to eat, clothes to wear and a roof over our head, we need to be grateful and ask who doesn't. If we live in peace and have good health, access to medical care, a quality education, and a meaningful job, we need to ask who doesn't. If we have a loving family, dear church friends and close relationship to God, we need to ask who doesn't and why not. We need to find these people and bring their plight to the attention of the entire world so that their basic needs can also be met.

Wasn't this Mark's point for connecting these two stories? The task of the church is to speak for those that society is ignoring or shunning. Believers are to be like that mother crying out for her child's welfare or the group seeking healing for their friend. We are to be advocates for those that have none. This means that we must care deeply for those that are hurting and be moved by their plight, even when we are tired from carrying our own burdens.

Speaking of balancing our burdens and others, do you ever get tired of caring? Have you experienced compassion fatigue? Have you identified people you will not help, for whatever reason? Would it help you to know that Jesus struggled with this, too?

I do not wish to be offensive this morning, but how we understand this text depends upon how seriously we take the humanity of Jesus and his capacity to learn and grow. It appears to me that Jesus was experiencing compassion fatigue or struggling with the boundaries of his compassion.

Why did he go to Tyre, a Gentile region in modern day Lebanon? I don't know, but I do know he did not want to be disturbed. Mark wrote, "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know that he was there."

Word of his arrival spread, however, and a Canaanite woman with a sick daughter fell at his feet begging him to heal her. When Jesus ignored her, his disciples encouraged him to respond, even if it was just to send her away. This prompted Jesus to tell her rather abruptly that he came to minister to the Jews and she was not one. However you wish to interpret Jesus' words and behavior, there is no denying that he comes across in this passage as cold and insensitive. He used a common, disparaging metaphor to inform this woman that he was under no obligation to help her.

No doubt she had been rebuffed before but it did not discourage her. She kept pleading for his help reminding Jesus that even dogs under the table eat the crumbs that fall on the floor. Surely he had some crumbs of grace that he could throw her way, even on a bad day. Did her persuasive words force Jesus to hear the cry of Gentiles and respond? You decide, but whatever his motive, when Jesus healed this woman's daughter, he revealed God's love for all people, Jew or Gentile.

Now, what comes next in Mark's gospel? Jesus traveled to the Decapolis region south of the Sea of Galilee, a distance of over one hundred miles, to heal another Gentile. This time it was a deaf man that was brought to his attention by this man's friends.

What was Mark's point? There can be no limits on the people we help if we are going to partner with Jesus. Compassion knows no season or geographical, economic, racial, ethnic or ideological boundaries. If Jesus was willing to help a Canaanite woman whose ancestors occupied the Promise Land, and a Gentile from Decapolis, then the church must hear the cry of adversaries as well as allies.

The church must find and tell the stories of any oppressed people that have no hope of being liberated. The world may deem some people unworthy, but the church must never. Instead, the church must see their value and offer them community. The church must find them, listen to their stories and then tell their stories with the same intensity of this mother with a sick child. The church must be determined, pushy and, if necessary, as impolite as this desperate mother.

Is the church doing this? The best way I know to answer this is to say that it is not being done to the degree it should. I don't hear the church speaking out for those in despair as much as I do journalists and leaders of humanitarian organizations. I hear far more saber rattling coming from pulpits than descriptions of the toll violence is taking upon innocent victims.

Do you know how many innocent children and adults have been injured, displaced or killed by the violence in the Middle East, Sudan, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq or a host of other countries? Do you know how often domestic abuse occurs in our country? Do you know how many children go to bed hungry each night? Do you know how many people suffer from treatable diseases because they can afford no health care? I don't and am indicted by my own questions. How about you?

Years ago, I would have preached this sermon differently. I would have talked about Jesus' ability to heal sick people and offered hope to anyone with a disease. I still offer that hope.

However, I see it in a new light now. The people that need a miracle performed in their lives so they can hear and speak are not secluded at home or in a hospital room. They are sitting in the pews and standing in the pulpits of churches all over this world. We are the ones that need

God to perform this great work. For we, like the Pharisees that Jesus encountered in the first half of this chapter, have grown deaf to the cries of those that are hurting instead of seeking them to be their advocates. May God forgive us and touch our ears and tongues this morning.

When Martin Luther put together a baptismal liturgy in 1523, the actual rite required that the pastor take some of his own saliva and touch the ears and lips of every child getting baptized. At the same instant, the pastor was to repeat the words of Jesus to the deaf man, “Ephatha,” which means “be opened.”

I know of no one that has continued this tradition, and probably for good reasons, but the idea is a good one. As Peter Marty writes, “Believers need to find ways not to be so tongue-tied with our faith. We need to support the weak, strengthen the faint-hearted and honor all people.”

This is what this text challenges us to do. This is what Mother Teresa did. It is what all of us can do with God’s help. Won’t you ask for it now?