

### **Jesus teaches us that ministry is personal.**

I love a good road trip! I don't mind riding or driving in a car for long periods of time. I've driven many miles all over California and Mexico through youth ministry. You get to know people on a different level on a road trip!

You find out about those who have to use the restroom every hour, those who want a quiet trip, those who wish to have the music blaring, those who want to play card games, and those who want to lead everyone in song. Then you have the sleepers, those who think they are starving and need to snack the whole trip, and those who want to stop to enjoy the view. You learn who is good in an emergency like when a tire blows, and those who are not! You learn who has come prepared for every imagined scenario and those who packed their wallet and ID in their luggage in the middle of all the other luggage!

Road trips have a way of opening people up and sharing at a deeper, more personal level. Parents of teens, if you want your teen to open up, go on a drive! I remember one road trip that changed my life as a junior in high school. Even though I was a church kid, I hated youth group. You might find that funny for those who know me since I've been a youth pastor for much of my life. But yes, I did hate youth group. I rarely went. I preferred going to "big church!" I hated it because it was so big, and I was pretty introverted and didn't talk much.

One day some friends got me to a Sunday morning high school gathering, and I met one of the leaders, Cynthia. Somehow, she and my friends conned me into going on a houseboat trip for summer camp. I thought I would get out of it because there was a conflict in my schedule on the day the youth ministry left on the trip. But Cynthia stepped in and said, "I have to go late too. I can drive you there!" So there I was, trapped in a car with an adult leader who was a talker and the epitome of an extrovert! Again, let me say I was pretty shy and introverted. Meaning, I didn't say much! Cynthia could see she wasn't getting much from me, so she changed her approach and, for four hours, asked me yes or no questions. That road trip had a significant impact on me. It was the first time someone from the youth ministry got to know me personally, away from the large ministry crowd. Cynthia cared enough to try to connect with me in a way that I would respond.

Sometimes as a pastor, you can easily forget that ministry is personal. You might think, "Duh, of course, it is." We can easily get caught up in all the busyness of significant events, forgetting why

we do what we do. Ministry isn't about events; it's not about large gatherings; it's about people. It's about the everyday, ordinary lives of people. It's about showing up in the unexpected. In these last few passages of Mark, we've seen Jesus teaching and healing large crowds. But in this final part of Mark 7, Jesus' ministry gets personal. This passage isn't just geared to pastors or people who work in a church; it's geared to all of us who follow Jesus. It's a beautiful example to each of us as we minister to those we come into contact with.

In this next section in Mark, we find Jesus taking a very long road trip. Remember that earlier in Mark 7, Jesus confronts the Pharisees and teachers of the law about tradition and hypocrisy. His disciples still are not understanding his teachings. Jesus and the disciples move from Gennesaret to Tyre. Jesus is moving into gentile territory to teach his disciples specific lessons.

In lesson 1, all foods are clean, and there are no distinctions between defiled and undefiled. In lesson 2, the disciples learn that the same goes for people; there are no distinctions—whether Jew or Gentile. We see this illustrated in the story of the Syrophenician woman that Kevin preached on last week. That theme will carry into this passage as the disciples learn in lesson 3 that ministry is personal no matter a person's background.

### **The Migration**

*"Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis" (Mark 7:31).* Jesus moves on from Tyre to an area known as the Decapolis. These were ten Greek cities on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. What is interesting is the route Jesus takes. Jesus goes the long way to get where he is going. He leaves Tyre and goes 20 miles north to Sidon (another gentile region) and then east to the Decapolis. About 120 miles in length. It would be like us going to Los Angeles by way of Reno and Las Vegas. Scholars say this would be an eight-month journey opening up the ministry of Jesus to the gentiles.

I wonder what kind of road trip this was with Jesus and his disciples. I'm sure there were shenanigans, but I'm also sure there were deep discussions and challenging questions. Eight months on the road would be an excellent training ground for Jesus to teach the disciples that ministry is personal.

If you remember Mark 5, Jesus has been in the area before. He healed the demon-possessed man and cast the demons into the pigs.

**After the man was healed, he begged to go with Jesus. Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed. Mark 5:19-20**

## **The Man**

So Jesus is back in the Decapolis, and some friends bring a man to Jesus. *"There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him" (Mark 7:32).* As Jesus comes back into the Decapolis, a group of people who probably heard the story of Jesus through the formerly demon-possessed man bring their deaf/mute friend to Jesus to be healed. The formerly demon-possessed man's testimony of Jesus has spread far and wide in the Decapolis. The first evangelist did his job!

We don't know much about this man except for his physical disabilities. We learn he is deaf, and we learn he can hardly speak. Most likely, this man had no idea who Jesus was, but his friends did. And his friend's faith is on full display as they bring him to Jesus to be healed.

I grew up in Fremont, where there is a relatively sizable deaf population. The church I grew up in always had a person doing sign language for the deaf population in our church. Fremont is also the home to the California School for Deaf. I learned early on from my friends who were deaf how isolating deafness can be. Imagine not being able to hear and speak, to listen and communicate.

In the Bible days, many believed that deafness was caused by demon possession. Along with that, people considered you unintelligent because you couldn't speak. I'm sure this man that Jesus encountered faced those stigmas.

**After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Mark 7:33-35**

## **The Master**

I love what Jesus does here. Mark goes into great detail about how Jesus heals this man. The first thing Jesus does is pull the man away from the crowd. Why? Jesus is getting personal. Jesus plans to minister to this man in a personal way. Jesus is about to teach the disciples that ministry is personal.

Second, Jesus puts his fingers in the man's ears, and after spitting, he touches the man's tongue. You might think this odd, but I believe Jesus is communicating with the man to let him know what he is about to do. Jesus communicates with the man in a

way he could understand. Jesus is communicating that healing will come to his ears and tongue.

Jesus does a third thing; he looks to heaven and sighs. He wants this man to know that his healing will come from God. It's also a reminder that everything Jesus did was hand in hand with his Father. Jesus relied on his Father in prayer. With this prayer came a deep sigh, literally a groan. Jesus sees this man's suffering; it weighs on him and causes him to pray. He utters the word ephphatha, and the man was healed. Immediately he could hear and speak! His tongue was loose, and he could speak clearly.

At that moment, this man's life completely changed. He went from being cut off from people to communicating with people. He went from an observer to a participant. Can you imagine not being able to hear and talk for years, and then suddenly you can share everything you've wanted to share? Can you imagine hearing birds sing for the first time or the wind whispering through the trees? This man was an observer most of his life. I bet he had a lot to say and many stories to tell!

**Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." Mark 7:36-37**

## **The Multitude**

All along, Jesus has been communicating with the man. In these last few verses, he turns his attention to the crowd. He implores them not to say a word, to keep this a secret. Jesus doesn't want his ministry to become a show. His fame had started to spread, which could impede his ministry in the short term. The more Jesus asked to keep things quiet, the more these people talked. They were astonished by what they witnessed and couldn't help but tell people. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, we find both Jews and gentiles astonished or amazed at either Jesus' teaching or healing. This is the second time the people of the Decapolis were amazed by Jesus' healing. The first was the demon-possessed man I spoke of earlier, and now the deaf/mute man.

The response of the gentiles was much different than the response he had received from his own countrymen. The people of Jesus' hometown were amazed by his teaching. They had never seen someone teach with such authority. However, the Pharisees accused Jesus of using Satan's power to heal. These gentiles received his miracles as a gift from God and affirmed, "He has done all things well."

That statement, "He has done all things well," is an important statement for these gentiles to confess. They see God at work through Jesus. It connotes God's creative act at the beginning when God says in the creation account, "It is good." The other proclamation these gentiles make, "He even makes the deaf hear

and the mute speak," is also important. This phrase comes directly from Isaiah.

**Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. Isaiah 35:5-6**

The Greek word *mogilalos* is used for the phrase "could hardly talk." That word is used in only one other place in the Bible, Isaiah 35:6, and the mute tongue, *mogilalos*, shout for joy. *Mogilalos* links our story in Mark 7 to the fulfillment of Isaiah 35. Little did these gentile people know that they had proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah.

What I love about the ministry of Jesus is that he takes this ragtag group of people with him. He wants them to know, and he wants us to know that we can all do ministry in him and through him. This passage is a beautiful example of Jesus teaching us that ministry is personal.

### **How Jesus did personal ministry.**

#### **Take People With You**

Jesus brought his disciples pretty much everywhere he went. It's a great practice to emulate when doing ministry. When I interned at Peninsula Bible Church, my ministry mentor took me everywhere. We went to the different high schools in the area and went to games and recitals. We made hospital visits.

I'll never forget the first time I went to the psychiatric ward for minors with my ministry mentor. I was scared to death! What do you say to a kid who wanted to end their life and failed? I watched that day as Nick ministered to this student. He picked up this student's hand, prayed for them, and told them how much God and we loved them. That lesson taught me a lot that day, and unfortunately, I've had the privilege of going there more often than I would like as I've worked with students. When I take interns and younger staff with me for hospital visits today, they watch me model the same thing. Take the person's hand and pray for them.

#### **Find ways to minister to people.**

If we follow the way of Jesus, we must find ways to minister to people. We need to get involved in people's lives. Just as Jesus communicated with this man, and just as Cynthia asked me yes or no questions, we must find ways to communicate with people who don't know Jesus. Most people find Christians to be judgmental hypocrites. I'll never forget my first youth ministry job after my internship at PBC. I was in a church where most people came to church because it was the social thing to do. They didn't want "too much Jesus," just enough of him to make them feel good. So when it came time for me to teach in youth group and I opened my Bible to exposit the scriptures (the PBC Way),

the kids walked out in the middle of my teaching! They wanted nothing to do with the Bible.

I learned fast that the way of doing ministry I was trained in wouldn't work in this community. I had to find new ways to minister to the people in my new neighborhood. I had to learn to share about Jesus without using Christianese. I had to learn to rely on Jesus to work through me in new ways.

Maybe you are feeling the same way in the culture we live in. Sharing the 4 Spiritual Laws with people turns them off more than turns them to Jesus. Find new ways to minister to people. Maybe it's having your neighbor over for dinner. Serving a need a neighbor may have. Sharing life with your neighbor, praying with and for your neighbor. We can do just what Jesus did. He made it personal and communicated to the man in a way he could understand. We, too, need to communicate the way of Jesus in a way individuals can understand.

#### **Pray**

In this passage, we see Jesus give a deep sigh; really, it's a groan. I think of Romans 8:26, where Paul says, "*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans*" (*emphasis mine*). I think Jesus felt the weight of this man's burden, and it caused him to pray.

Have you ever felt the weight of someone's burden and didn't know how to pray? The Holy Spirit intercedes for us. The way to reach our lost friends is to feel the weight of that lostness and brokenness and to bring it to the Father in prayer. Who in your life is lost? Who in your life needs Jesus? I would encourage you to start praying now. Ask God to break your heart over the things that break His.

#### **Speak the Word**

Jesus spoke one word to this man, *Ephphatha*, which means "be opened." Imagine that man hearing those words for the first time! At some point, we have to speak God's word. At some point, we have to proclaim Jesus. I just told you about my first youth ministry. I was heartbroken when the kids walked out when I opened the Bible. In my naiveté, I didn't understand why you wouldn't want to listen to God's word. It took me almost a year to gain the trust of these students. Because of Jesus, I showed up, prayed, and found creative ways to minister to them. But much like the deaf man, their ears were closed.

God used a tragedy in our community to open their ears. A few days after returning from a camp, one of the most popular kids in our community, who also went to camp with us, was killed in a skateboarding accident. It rocked everyone's world. Early that morning, the high school called me to be at the school assembly. They asked me to give the announcement to the student body about Ryan. Then a miracle of God happened, and they asked me

to say some comforting words from scripture...at...the...school... assembly!

After I had shared the news about Ryan and shared about Jesus and Lazarus, a junior gal who was in our ministry came running from the stands and almost knocked me over as she hugged me and cried a river of tears. She wanted to know more about Jesus. One by one, as I stood on the basketball court of that school, high school students came up to me, wanting to know more about Jesus. God used his Word to open the ears of students and their families that year. As I continued to open the Word week in and week out, kids didn't get up and leave. They sat, listened, and were transformed by the Word of God. This was a miracle! Their ears were opened! Not only were their ears opened, but their tongues proclaimed Jesus! Jesus did this, and I got to be a part of it. Be ready to speak the Word.

As we enter this new year, how can you emulate Jesus in ministry? Who do you know who needs more time so personal ministry can take place? When we look at this passage and follow in the way of Jesus' personal ministry, which of these four ways of making ministry personal is most difficult for you?

Jesus teaches us all we need to know to reach a lost and broken world. The way of Jesus is to open the ears of those who are spiritually deaf and communicate in a way that they can understand the good news. The way of Jesus is to get personal, to focus on individuals. The way of Jesus is to pray for them, bringing them before the Father and speak God's word into their lives. The result is that Jesus is glorified and lifted up, and people declare, "Jesus does all things well."

Father, we too can be deaf—deaf to the things of God. We can be cut off from the life that really matters—life with God. Father, we can hear the word of God and not put it into practice; we can receive communion and not be nourished by it. So, Jesus, we come to you and ask you to touch the ears of our hearts and loosen our tongues so that we may hear your life-giving words and speak clearly about how you are working in our lives. Amen.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail,  
please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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