

Oct. 7, 2018

Mark 7: 31-37

Prayer: Dear Lord, This has been an excruciatingly hard week for many of us. Help us to remember whose children we are and to act accordingly. We are grateful for your promise to be with us when we gather in your name. Amen.

Mediocre Miracles

Several years ago, I ran across an online column by a young woman who wrote about spiritual matters from “a quirky, sometimes irreverent” perspective.

Neely Stansell-Simpson is actually from South Carolina and served for awhile as a youth pastor in Tandy’s former church, Eastminster Presbyterian.

In 2009 Neely’s mother was diagnosed with cancer. That was the same year Neely had her own daughter, Sophia.

So here Neely was, sandwiched, as so many people are, between a sick parent who needed her help and a newborn.

When Sophia was 3, Neely’s mom went into the hospital for an entire month to have a growth removed. Her small intestine was re-routed to a red, inflamed hole to the right of her belly button.

In medical jargon, she had an ileostomy, and it left her pale and weak and hoarse and 20 pounds lighter.

Once she was home, she required round-the-clock care from her husband and Neely.

Three-year-old Sophia, meanwhile, not understanding her mother's fatigue or her grandmother's absence, grew clingy and demanding. Sophia's own dad was at home three hours away, which only made things worse.

The little girl saw nurses come and go. She saw adults shutting doors and having serious conversations, while she was left alone to play in the living room.

Sophia began to act out and throw tantrums, cling to Neely's legs, deliberately disobey. She hit Neely. She refused to go to sleep at night until an exhausted Neely slipped into bed beside her.

Understandably, Neely was tired, desperate, and annoyed with her 3-year-old. Anyone who's a parent has been there.

The sick grandmother wisely counseled her daughter to be patient, that the little girl was dealing with the uncertainty and chaos in the household the only way she knew how. Neely knew that, of course, and felt guilty for not holding it all together better.

One day, Neely needed to change her mother's ostomy bag, which was a painful procedure. But Sophia clung to her legs and begged not to be left in the living room alone.

Finally, Neely gave up. "Fine," she said, and she allowed Sophia into the grandmother's sick room. She was sure she was going to scar the little girl for life.

But Sophia just stood on the stool at the foot of her grandmother's bed and watched as her mother changed the bag.

"Oh Granna," she said, "you have a very big booboo. Does it hurt?"

The grandmother admitted that yes, it did hurt. “But if you hold my hand, it will feel better.”

Sophia hopped down from the stool and took up her place beside her grandmother, holding her hand. And that became her job for the rest of the caretaking journey. Her behavior improved almost immediately, as the adults in her life stopped trying to shield her from the hurt in the bedroom.

At 3 years old, Sophia needed to be needed. She needed to be included. *Like every human being ever born.*

In that column, Neely described the episode as a “mediocre miracle,” one of those times when God’s grace bursts through not at our behest, but in spite of us. It wasn’t a transcendent mountaintop experience, but more like slogging through the desert -- *and finding manna!* -- day after day after day.

Now that’s it’s allegedly fall, I’ve been speaking at some of our partner churches. And at some point, I almost always tell them a similar story about Triune. My favorite story about Triune.

It is about how we used to operate pretty much as a distribution center. We had church over here, but in the fellowship hall, we gave away meals and clothes and asked nothing in return.

And we might still be doing that if the Sophias in the congregation hadn’t been so persistent. People began showing up during the week to sweep and mop and pick up trash.

They began offering to repair the plaster and paint the walls. They started to lay carpet and repair toilets.

And before we knew it, we were operating out of a new model, a model of mutual volunteerism and service and respect and camaraderie.

We currently have a committed volunteer named Mr. James. If you were to see him here during the week, you would swear he's on staff. He vacuums and cleans our offices and mops the hallways and pretty much tells all of us what to do.

Lately, we have learned that Mr. James is having some heart issues. So when he came in on Monday morning, Don drove him home. And he walked right back.

Of course, all I can see are the headlines: *Triune Works Heart-Weakened Volunteer To Point of Collapse.*

You are our witnesses. *We drove him home.*

We all need to feel needed. We all need to feel included. And when it happens in a community, I suppose it is a mediocre miracle, just like Sophia's, just like Mr. James'.

Not a dramatic healing from cancer. (Neely's mom eventually died.) Not a lifting of physical and natural laws.

But a quieter miracle. *A miracle, perhaps, that even we can accomplish.*

Today's Scripture passage is a quiet one in the gospel of Mark. It is a passage that I didn't pay attention to for many years though I preached from Mark often. It's overshadowed by more dramatic stories.

It comes right after the well-known story about Jesus's exchange with a Syrophenician woman, a Gentile. When she asks Jesus to cast a demon from her daughter, he says it's not fair to throw children's food to the dogs. We look at that story a lot because it sounds so out of character for Jesus.

So maybe that's why it took me awhile to notice this quieter, gentler miracle that follows. Let's read it together now. Please turn in your Bibles to **Mark 7: 31-37**.

31 Then he (Jesus) returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.'

³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

Let's put this story in its proper context. It comes at the end of chapter 7, a chapter that deals extensively with Jews and Gentiles, clean and unclean, insiders and outsiders.

In the first part of the chapter, the Pharisees voice disapproval because the disciples aren't washing their hands. Jesus accuses them of hypocrisy, of using their own laws to circumvent the actual love commandments of the Ten Commandments.

It's not what goes into a person that defiles him, Jesus said. It's what comes out – evil intentions that lead to **“fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.”** (Mark 7: 22)

Then after the verbal teaching comes the tactile teaching. Jesus exhibits through his actions what he's just talked about.

Traveling deep into Gentile territory – which by definition is unclean for Jews – he encounters the Syrophenician woman who asks him to heal her daughter of an unclean spirit. Jesus said, **“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to dogs.”**

In other words, his healing was for Jews, not Gentiles, who were commonly called dogs. This is upsetting to us. Was Jesus serious? Or was he being sarcastic, parroting what the Pharisees would have said? You'll find scholars on both sides of that question.

Whatever he meant, because of the woman's faith and persistence, he did cast the demon out of her daughter.

Then we come to the quiet little story of the deaf man, what I'm calling a "mediocre miracle." I call it that partially because the miracle is tucked behind the flashier exchange with the Gentile woman. But I'm also calling it that because I think the miracle is more about where and whom Jesus is healing than the miraculous healing itself.

Jesus is now in the Decapolis, a region of 10 Roman cities. He's still in Gentile territory, still enacting what he was teaching just a few verses back.

"They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him."

The Greek is clear. The man could vocalize, but because he couldn't hear, he didn't know how words were supposed to sound. His sounds were garbled, unclear.

Jesus took him away in private, touched his ears, touched his tongue and prayed. And the man was healed.

In chapter 7, Mark makes a point of showing Jesus dealing with people of whom the Pharisees disapproved. Out there in the hinterlands of the Decapolis, there was no way they were going to be ritually clean.

And yet, Jesus was right in there, touching ears, spitting and touching tongues. That might even make us a little squeamish. No doubt it caused the Pharisees to pull their beards out in fury.

The Gentiles needed healing. Jesus – and Mark -- wanted to show they were worth healing.

But did you notice the opening to this story? “*They brought to him a deaf man and they begged him to lay his hand on him.*”

The man’s friends brought him to Jesus. His allies begged Jesus to intervene on his behalf. What is that if not serving their friend? If not working on behalf of their friend? If not aiding and abetting a minor miracle?

You know, sometimes people get frustrated with us. They want to come here and serve meals. They want to pour tea or plant flowers or shovel mulch. And sometimes, we let them.

But it’s important for us who are here regularly to serve each other, too. That’s what we hang our hat on. We are who we are not because we give stuff away – but because we live in service to each other.

How many urns of coffee has Robert brewed?

How many cups of tea has Susan served?

How many loads of laundry has Alec washed?

How many worship brochures has Kenny folded, and Paul and Richard given out?

We’re not a soup kitchen. We’re a congregation serving each other, eating together and cleaning up.

We’re not a food pantry. We’re a congregation working together to distribute groceries, load them in car trunks, help young mothers get their children safely to the parking lot.

We’re not a laundromat. We’re a congregation that trims hedges or does other chores while getting our laundry washed.

But if we are awake to it, we know very well there's something else going on. I asked Joshua to sing selections today from the late Leonard Cohen, a spiritual songwriter if there ever was one. Someone who could see the world on many levels.

Because here's the thing about the church of Jesus Christ: While we are operating on a very basic, down-to-earth, practical, human level in our dealings with one another, we believe Jesus walks among us.

*Jesus was a sailor
When he walked upon the water....
And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said "All men will be sailors then
Until the sea shall free them."*

Leonard Cohen was interviewed shortly before his death in 2016. He said, "I don't have any spiritual strategy... . I limp along like so many of us do in these realms. Occasionally, I've felt the grace of another presence in my life"

Or as he once sang it, more poetically,

*And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.*

This is how we live together in this place: We listen to the gospel in whatever form it appears, whether in the book of Mark or the words of a Canadian songwriter.

We acknowledge the wisdom of allowing little Sophia to feel needed as she held her grandmother's hand.

And we hold tight onto one another's hands in the prayer circle on Wednesday mornings,
before the food pantry gets underway.

That might not look like much of a miracle.

But I'm going to call it one.

Amen.