

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us. Amen.

One of the great conundrums of the Gospels is what scholars call “the Messianic Secret.” In three of the four gospel accounts of Jesus, on several occasions, Jesus asks those around him not to reveal who he is, or even mention what has taken place. Today’s reading from Mark 7 is typical. In the gentile region of the Decapolis, near the Sea of Galilee, a deaf man, who also had a speech impediment, was brought to Jesus. He took the man aside, and in private, healed him. “Then,” the Gospel says, “Jesus ordered them to tell no one.” Why? The question nags at us because there is no obvious answer. But like everyone else, I have my theory, and I know that you can’t wait to hear it. But stay with me, because at the end, it really does matter to our own faith and discipleship.

As Christians we believe, as the Gospels proclaim, that the purpose and reason for Christ’s coming among us was to reveal God’s Kingdom, to fulfill the law and the prophets. Isaiah says it all: “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come to save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.” Making Christ known is what it’s all about, so in knowing Christ, we know the One who comes to save us. When Jesus orders those around him to keep quiet, they can’t believe he means it. The more he admonishes them, the more zealously they proclaim it. And, gentiles though they are, they quote Isaiah, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” Rejoice—the presence and glory of God is among us to save us. Mark doesn’t seem to believe Jesus means it either. He writes the story out for all of us to read and see that these healings reveal God’s glory and fulfill the prophets!

So Jesus, why are you so self-effacing? “Well Jim,” Jesus answers, “It’s like this. I have come to proclaim God’s glory, to be God’s glory in the world, but in a particular way—as a prime and self-giving emptying of myself. No one must think or experience anything I say or do as self-serving, as a gesture of power or of pride, or for any personal gain whatsoever. I am the willing outpouring of God’s love and compassion. That’s it. That’s all of it. No vengeance, no recompense as Isaiah would like. I hate to say it, Jim, but in this context at least, Isaiah may have been mistaken. I cannot proclaim God’s glory, nor can I ask others to do so. But in experiencing God’s grace through me, the Holy Spirit enlivens their hearts and loosens their tongues, and opens those eyes, and they are astonished beyond measure, and they proclaim—‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth—in me—peace to God’s people.’ I learned this in the temptations that come to me as part of my baptism. The devil is very upset about this, but through old Lucifer, you see, God was showing me that it’s not about me, my needs, my glory, stones turned to bread for me to eat. It’s not about earthly power, all the kingdoms of the world, and such like. It’s not about using the Gospel to save myself. Worst sin of , but to be the outpouring of God for others only. So, you see, as the tongues of others are released, I must be

silent, and at the end, before Pilate, as the devil himself swarmed about me, I had to be completely silent. I said nothing. I gave everything. It was always that way.”

Thank you, Jesus. That was my theory! You have proved me right. Yes! Oh oh! I may have, in your presence, broken all my baptismal vows. I just made this sermon about me—and not about Jesus, about me, and not my trust in him—about me, and not my desire to follow him and be myself the self-emptying love that he showed us. It’s a good thing we’re confessing our sins later on. See how easy it is to get the Gospel wrong.

That’s where the gentile woman comes in. She is us. She is how I ought to be. She humbles herself, asking nothing for herself, but for her daughter. Claiming nothing for herself as a pagan who has never worshiped the true God. She is silent, waiting like a dog for a crumb to fall from the master’s table. Self-emptying meets self-emptying. Jesus says to her as to us, “may you so eat my flesh and drink my blood that I may evermore dwell in you and you in me.”

A Labor Day story. A couple came in to see me. They asked for nothing. They just wanted to share their situation. They have two children in school. They were homeless for a couple of months after he lost his job and they were evicted. She waits tables, but it’s not enough to pay the rent. They have found a place, and thanks to others they paid the deposit and rent, but now he’s laid off again and the rent is due. They don’t have it. She can’t bear to think that they might be homeless again. He will be called back to work, but no one knows when. They weren’t asking for themselves, but for their children. They made no claims. They were just waiting under the table. Did I know where crumbs might be found? Thanks to ACTC—the Assistance Center—and U Care—the Timonium equivalent—most of the money is there, but not all. I can only pray that the landlord has a compassionate and self-emptying heart, and can meet them in their need and see them through to better times, and take what crumbs we have gathered and accept them as enough for now. “He seems like a nice guy,” they said.

A Church Story. At hospital bedsides and in hundreds of quiet healing services that take place in parishes around the world every day, just as we do here on Thursdays at noon, we gather. No TV, no vast auditorium filled with expectant worshipers, no 800 number to call or website to contact, or book to buy. No offering is taken. Just a quiet chapel. We know that we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under the table, but we come to be anointed in the healing grace of Christ. We reach out in the self-emptying spirit of Christ himself and quietly accept his healing. And we know. We know that healing is real, and that in Christ we are held in wholeness. And knowing this, we come again and again to embrace that wholeness even as we continue to be broken. The self-emptying Christ says, “Tell no one.” But our eyes are open, our tongues released, our limbs are strong, and we are astonished. “He does everything well,” we confess. “He makes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.”

*Amen*