

## Touch & Tenderness Mark 7:31ff

When we meet for the home group on Thursday evenings to read the Bible, we use a simple but ever so fascinating method of Sharing the Bible. Four to six or more people listen together to a Biblical text or story. What they need is a quiet atmosphere. No noise at the place where they meet. No phone calls coming in, no interruption by everyday things. No hurry or pressure of time. Just a circle of friends around a candle and 45 to 60 minutes of meditation and quiet sharing. Nobody needs to be an expert. Nothing is right or wrong. With our different views and perceptions we all try to find our personal answer to the challenge of the Biblical text.

At the beginning the text is read out loud once. And in three minutes of absolute silence the participants may go over the text once more or just close their eyes and remember the words just heard. Then each person chooses a word or a phrase in the text that strikes them most.

As simple as that.

Everybody is invited to share the word, phrase or verse which struck them. Each member of the group merely shares by what and why he or she is touched, surprised or moved.

We don't give reasons, nor do we discuss. Each participant simply says "I was most struck by..." Full stop.

Four weeks ago 5 of us were reading a pretty unusual healing story from the New Testament. We all know that Jesus healed people: blind, lame, mute and deaf people; people with damaged parts of their bodies, and people possessed by demons... He called them, sometimes touched them, blessed them and assured them of their faith.

But what he did in the story we shared on that Thursday evening in my living room...! Well, listen to it yourselves...

### **Mark 7:31ff**

**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.**

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

**33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.**

**34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, «Ephphatha,» that is, «Be opened.»**

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

**36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.**

**37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, «He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.»**

What really struck me at "first sight" was the verse telling us that Jesus took the deaf man aside in private, away from the crowd. And next came the observation that the people – I wonder who they were: the text says "they brought to him –

Jesus this is – a deaf man...” ...these people begged Jesus to lay a hand on the man.

They'd asked for a hand, and what the man got were fingers in his ears and a touch to his tongue. I bet nobody had expected this: so much closeness and intimacy!?

...and I realized that Jesus at times gives more and differently than we tend to think.

I am not sharing with you the other people's observations. They had interesting issues, too. After we'd allowed each other enough time to share, the text was read a second time...

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After having heard this again, we were given 5 minutes of silence in which to meditate the question: “What do you, God, want to tell me with this story personally for my very own life?”

And I was immensely touched when I understood that God wants to come ever so close to me. That is what he wanted to tell me on that evening.

What Jesus does in the story can also be an image for what God wants to do in my life: come ever so close, be an intimate friend... maybe more than I think I can accept or bear.

I mean, just imagine: Jesus is poking in the man's ear, then he spits – presumably on his fingers – and with that he touches the man's tongue. Goodness me!

How close do I want God to come in my life? How many surprises has God got in store for me?

In the story people bring this disabled man to Jesus and have a clear expectation of what had to happen. They thought they knew what would be best: lay your hand on him.

But Jesus knew better. He didn't lay a hand on him, he actually took the man aside and lay hands **in** him. He did more, went further, came closer than all the others would have expected. Neither the man himself nor the folks around might have been able to imagine that Jesus would do such a thing to help the person they'd asked him to help.

For me Jesus' encounter with the deaf man is an image for the relationship between God and me: how on earth, how close would God come to me? To me – who is simply asking for a hand laid on me? How deep inside would he come, and fill me, change me and heal me?

And I understand: God's message for me on that evening was an overwhelming and touching message of love, care and intimacy... to enable me to simply hear and speak... to be God's ear and God's voice in this world.

God's message in this story can also be the silent and loving whispering of words like "come away with me", "come and rest", "step aside from the business and the crowds", "withdraw from all the noise in your life" and "hold on a moment or two..." and you will be healed.

Jesus had taken the man aside in private, the story tells us, away from the crowd, and only then did he perform his miracle.

Another message God may like to let me hear in this story, may be that I find out that not everything needs to be spread widely and told everybody. Some things may be kept as a treasure... only to be shared with rare and close friends.

Jesus does the most wonderful thing to the man: he gives him back his voice and his hearing. But at the same time, he ordered people not to tell anyone... which – of course? – they didn't respect.

By not sharing the story of the deaf man's healing with just everybody, the story remains more special – a treasure to the man and his friends, rather than a headline in tomorrow's newspaper that the whole world talks about.

What God does for us is very special – and should therefore be handled specially and with love and care. One message among many...

One more aspect in the story is that people brought the man to Jesus. We don't know why he didn't do it on his own. Because of fear? Weakness? Feelings of inadequacy?

But he had friends who obviously cared and wanted him to get better. And God may say through this: when you don't know how to approach me, I will send you a friend through whom you can come close to me and meet me. You are never alone. You are a member of my family. There is always somebody who cares, who shows you the way to me and helps you find your way back to your old or "new" self. There is always an opportunity to experience healing. This is my promise to you!

After all those different messages that God had given to us, were shared, and everybody in the Bible Sharing group was given enough time to listen and to speak, the story was read out loud a third time...

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We all discovered how intensive the experience of three different voices reading the same story can be. With every reading a new note was struck and a new aspect revealed.

After the third reading the group observed a deep silence again. Five minutes can be really long... ☺

During this time every individual tried to find an answer to what had been understood as God's personal message to the people in the group. They were asked to answer in a sentence or two of prayer: praise, thanks, promise, intercession...

Each person expressed aloud his or her personal answer to the word of God, and the rest of the group confirmed the prayer through the "Amen".

And there we were, giving thanks for God's touch and tenderness, for friends who help us meet Jesus, for the treasure that we are given in meeting God and finding in him the true meaning for our lives. We gave thanks for the peace and calm that had been given to us - through this story as well as through those 45 minutes of listening and sharing.

This is the story of 5 people and a text.

After a beautiful piece of music we all went our different ways.

We went out into that Thursday night with a sense of being healed and restored.

At the end of this short sermon I ask, what would your story with this text be? What have you heard in three times of our reading it aloud and you listening to it?

What ever it is, take it with you, keep it safe and let it heal and restore you.  
Amen.