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Proper 18B
Peace, Seattle
September 9, 2018
Mark 7:24-37

WE ARE THE "THEY"

When he was six years old, award winning film and stage actor James Earl Jones—best known nowadays as the voice of Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* franchise—moved with his grandparents from Arkabutla, Mississippi, to Manistee County, Michigan.[1]

There, as a first grader in a one-room school, young James Earl and his cousin Randy were exposed to speech they'd never heard before. Students rolled their "r's"; they pronounced the "i-n-g" at the ends of words. Even the black kids, he later recalled, spoke differently in Michigan than they did back home.

The boys found these new pronunciations of old words hilarious, and arriving home after their first day they fell to the floor giggling as they mimicked the new sounds.

But soon afterward, deeply impacted by the move and by the complex and at times traumatic realities that accompanied being raised by his grandparents, James Earl Jones began to stutter. And for the next eight years he withdrew into silence.

Oddly enough, his silence at school was tolerated, as his teachers were willing to assess his learning through written means. But church was another matter. For there, in the church his grandfather built after their migration north, he was forced to stand and recite Sunday School verses—and as his stammering took over, he classmates laughed at him.[2]

From the age of six to about fourteen, James Earl was virtually mute.[3]
Oh he spoke to his family in basic terms. He talked to the animals on the farm, and to himself.
But when a stranger entered his home, he froze.

In his autobiography, VOICES AND SILENCES, Jones tells what happened one winter when a blizzard dumped several feet of fresh snow on top of fields that already were knee-deep. Roads were shut down. Schools closed. And in the midst of nature's drama his cousin Randy had an epileptic seizure.

PUT ON YOUR SNOWSHOES, JAMES EARL, his Grandma ordered. RUN TO THE STORE. ASK SOMEBODY TO CALL THE DOCTOR…RUN! He goes on:

> "The store stood a mile away through the snow, but I didn't care. All I knew was that Randy was sick, maybe even dying. I ran as hard as I could. I cut across the fields, hoping to get there faster. Finally, I reached Frank Fortelka's store. I raced inside to [deliver] Mama's urgent message—and I started to stutter. I couldn't get the words out. I felt like Randy's life depended on me, and I couldn't speak.
>
> "'Sit down—relax,' Mr. Fortelka told me. 'You can get it out.' Those were moments of sheer panic. But finally I calmed down, and the words came. The doctor was called. Randy recovered. But the stuttering—that stayed."

[1] Jame Earl Jones. *Voices and Silences.* (New York: Macmillan, 1993) Other biographical facts in this sermon are drawn from this autobiography.
[2] It wasn't long, writes Jones in his autobiography, before he told his grandma, "No more, Mama. I'm just not going back there." And in that very religious family, he was allowed to stay away from church.
[3] Ibid, p. 41.

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> "I think a stutterer ends up with a greater need to express himself, or perhaps, a greater awareness of the deep human need for expression," writes Jones. "Being a mute or stutterer leaves you painfully aware of how you would like to say something. And I would know, as an afterthought, how I could have said this or that. But at the moment you are too busy making the choice to speak or not to speak, to use this word or that word… When I was a boy, speech became a wall I could not surmount."[4]

As Jesus, in today's gospel, leaves the coast at Tyre and his encounter with the woman there, he heads southeast beyond Galilee to a region called the Decapolis or Ten Cities.

Like Tyre, this is gentile territory; and like Tyre his reputation as a healer precedes him. For no sooner does he arrive, Mark tells us, than they bring to him a man whom Mark calls "a stammerer" (μογιλαλον), a man who can neither hear nor speak, and they beg Jesus to lay his hand on him.

We know nothing of this man's backstory, how old he is, whether he was born with his impediments or suffered some sort of trauma or injury that left him this way. We wonder how he's managed to survive in a world that does not look kindly upon those who are considered less than whole.

There is nothing in Mark's account to answer these questions, to fill in these blanks.
But one small word, a simple pronoun used twice in verse 32, speaks volumes. The word is "they."

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

Whatever his backstory, however these challenges may have dominated him, this man has not journeyed through life alone. A caring community surrounds him. A community ready to go to bat for him. And when word reaches them that a healer named Jesus is coming through town, they seize the opportunity to speak for their friend who cannot speak for himself. And Jesus listens to them.

Sisters and brothers, WE ARE THE "THEY."

- We are the ones who come alongside those who might otherwise be left standing alone.
- We are the ones who befriend those who might otherwise be isolated, avoided, ridiculed, laughed at.
- We are the ones who have learned to own our own vulnerabilities and to know where we can go for companionship and healing.
- We are the ones who take each other by the hand and lead one other to Jesus. We are the "they."

In every ministry setting I've served, where challenges have emerged and there's been a division of opinion within the community, the growing friction has often been telegraphed through people's use of pronouns.

In contexts where conflict or division was trending upward, I'd begin hearing the pronouns "US" and "THEM."

When you revert to US and THEM language what you're really saying is US versus THEM.
The US means "we are right." The THEM means "they are wrong."

You could say that the whole thrust of today's second reading is about James saying: "In this community gathered around Jesus there is no THEY, only WE; there is no THEM, only US. We're all in this together, we belong to one another, one community united across economic, social and

[4] Ibid, p. 42, 43.

political lines, who, when we look at each other, see Christ; who, when we look at our neighbor, at the OTHER, find that Jesus is looking back. WE ARE THE 'THEY.'"

When the man who has no way to express himself verbally is brought into the company of Jesus by a community of caring friends, a new life trajectory begins to unfold.

Not wanting to make their encounter into a sideshow, Jesus takes the man to a private space where he puts his fingers into the man's ears, spits and touches the man's tongue, and sighs EPHPHATHA! And immediately the man's ears are opened, his tongue released, and he begins to speak plainly.

"Ephphatha" is not a Greek word, it's Aramaic—Jesus' own heart language. Amid the Greek in which his gospel and the others are written, Mark wants us to hear words straight from Jesus' heart.

> "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head," said Nelson Mandela. "If you talk to a man in his language, that goes to his heart."[5]

Or, in this case, through his heart, to his ears and out his tongue.

LaDonna Sanders Nkosi, who ministered for a period with partners in a South African church context, writes:

> "I learned in Bible studies, preaching, and worship that the biblical texts are understood to hold the quality of what they speak about. In other words, scriptures that speak about healing bring the quality of healing to a place or situation when proclaimed or prayed aloud. Scriptures about peace and God's shalom bring peace and shalom when proclaimed in the community.
>
> Perhaps, with this in mind, we might begin to declare "Ephphatha!" in our nations, our cities, and the closed places in our midst. Ephphatha! Be opened! That our hearts may be open to see one another as God sees.[6]

The turning point in James Earl Jones' battle with stuttering came during his freshman year of high school, where Donald Crouch, a former college professor, had come out of retirement to teach English.

He introduced his students to classic literature—Shakespeare, Emerson, Longfellow—and James Earl, inspired, began to try his hand at poetry. When professor Crouch read a poem Jones had written, he challenged him to recite it before the class. Jones remembers the moment:

> I was shaking as I stood up… I strained to get the words out, pushing from the bottom of my soul. I opened my mouth—and to my astonishment, the words flowed out smoothly, every one of them. There was no stutter. All of us were amazed, not so much by the poem as by the performance.
>
> Professor Crouch and I had stumbled on a principle which speech therapists and psychologists understand. The written word is safe for the stutterer. The script is a sanctuary. I could read from the paper the words I had composed there, and speak as fluently as anybody in the class."[7]

James Earl Jones had turned the corner. He no longer had to be silent. And the rest is history.

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[5] Quoted in LaDonna Sanders Nkosi, *Living the Word*. Christian Century, September 7, 2018. https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/speaking-language-heart-mark-724-37

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid, p. 66

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Jones needed someone to help him discover a way to move beyond the impediment that dominated his daily existence. His teacher Donald Crouch fulfilled that role initially, and many other teachers followed.

The man in Mark needed friends to enable him to move beyond his impediments. His caring community brought him to Jesus, and Jesus opened up a whole new world.

EPHPHATHA! cries Jesus, OPEN UP!

In this story, Christ's command may be about hearing and speech, but the image seems emblematic of the gospel as a whole. Again and again Jesus appears—both in the flesh and by the Spirit—to open doors where there were walls, to open hearts that had been shut down, to open eyes for seeing and ears for hearing.[8]

In a world where being closed off to one another seems to be the order of the day, where the agenda is to build walls rather than nurture common connections, Jesus' words open us to one another and to God's reign in our midst. "Ephphatha! Be opened!"[9]

May it be so. Amen.

[8] See John Stendahl, *Christian Century* blog, 9/23/13. https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2013-09/open
[9] Nkosi, op. cit.