

Causes and Side-Effects

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Mark 7:24-37

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre.²⁴ He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷ He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'²⁸ But she answered him, 'Sir,²⁸ even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'²⁹ Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.'³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

31 Then he 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 Jesus³⁶ 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.'

I suspect that most of you have seen one of those pharmaceutical commercials, where when you get to the end, you hear the voice of someone talking at five times normal speed or are confronted with a barely readable text that zooms across your television screen with a long list of the potential side effects of the drug that is being advertised. The side effects are treated like an afterthought. They are considered secondary to the drug's desired effect.

Can you imagine what the world would look like if more things other than just prescription drugs came with a list of side effects? How about if kittens came with a warning that said, "side effects may include unwanted hair on your clothes; frequent trips to the vet and potential loss of your favourite chair?" Or how about every time you sit down to Goggle something on the internet the screen flashed a warning that might say, "Caution, your initial fact-finding mission could spiral into an all-night information binge, causing you to be late for work. Missing out on time spent with your family. And lead one to dwell on too much useless or distracting information?" Or imagine if when you got married and planned to have children

if someone listed the potential side-effects? The list could be so long and so daunting, we might never find the courage to do either. One thing we know about life is that there are causes, there are effects, and then there are side-effects.

Our Scripture reading from Mark's Gospel this morning has something to say about the side effects of life and how we deal the side effects. It seems that Jesus himself was not impervious to side effects. The text describes how Jesus and his disciples had decided to take a side trip, get away from the crowds for a bit as they moved away from Galilee into the region of Tyre and Sidon. It says, "Jesus entered a house and didn't want anyone to know that he was there."

I like that line. It gives us another glimpse of Jesus' human side. Here we see a man who just wanted to escape for a while and go into hiding. Spend some time with his disciples. Maybe have a few days off. But then Jesus has to deal with the side effects that were being caused from the miracles he had already performed. As the verse says, "yet he could not escape notice." Fame was an apparent side effect of the good work he was doing and Jesus was now in high demand all over the place, even far removed from his regular ministry.

We can imagine the scene as while Jesus is sitting there with his disciples, this woman bursts into the house and throws herself at Jesus' feet begging him to help her daughter who is inflicted with an unclean spirit. We don't know exactly what the "unclean spirit" refers to, but it was something that prevented the woman's daughter from living a normal life. It could have been any number of things in the ancient world...we just don't know...the text doesn't tell us. But if there is one thing we do know for sure, is that it wasn't just the young girl who was troubled by the unclean spirit. It is obvious that her mother was too! That was one of the side effects of her daughter's illness, it was something her mother had to deal with too. I think all of us can relate to this woman on some level. I suspect there isn't a person here who hasn't been impacted when a child or a loved one is beset by illness. Although they are the one's dealing with the direct effects, we deal with the side effects. And this woman is dealing with the side-effects, to the point that she has now taken up her daughter's plight and has come to Jesus, looking for him to support her cause and do something.

Then we have a similar situation with the story of the healing of the deaf man. We don't know exactly why he was deaf and mute. Maybe he had too much ear wax? Maybe he was obstinate? Maybe he was truly deaf and tongue tied, we cannot know for sure. But there was something about this man's condition that also had an effect on the crowd that brought him to Jesus. Maybe they were sick of having to care for him or were tired of seeing him beg

on the street. Since he was always in their midst they had to live with the effects of his condition every day. So the crowd had motivation to make this man their cause and they bring him to Jesus, apparently hoping that Jesus will support their cause and not only help the deaf man, but help them deal with the side effects they were experiencing.

I think that how the mother and how the crowd behave in this reading represent how a lot of us deal with some of the side effects of our own living. How many of us end up championing or supporting a certain cause because in some way, shape, or form that cause has had an effect on our lives. I can speak personally to this as someone who has lost a brother to diabetes and other siblings who suffering from the condition. Diabetic research has been an important cause to me over the years. This is time of year when tens of thousands of individuals are out walking and running in support of the battle against cancer. Individuals showing their support for this important cause. I doubt there isn't a person in this room who hasn't supported the fight to end cancer research because either you or someone close to you has suffered. We have all had some sort of association with the disease and know it's a cause worth supporting.

It seems that everyone these days has a cause of some sort. Every celebrity has to have a cause. Every sports figure has a cause. There are dozens and dozens of different coloured ribbons that represent different causes. If you're on Facebook, every day you can be solicited with requests to support some Facebook friend's "cause." The fact that there are tens of thousands of registered charities in Canada alone should tell you something about just how many causes are out there.

I'm not attempting to diminish anyone's cause by saying this. For as each of us knows, the causes we support are often because of something that has affected us deeply or from something that has changed our lives to the point that we cannot help but want to champion a cause. The danger of dealing with the side effects of life is in how we treat our causes. Sometimes our causes can become an end in and of themselves and they can consume us to the point that we feel as if our cause is the only one that matters. What makes my cause more important or more worthy than another? It's a question we must ask ourselves from time to time. I believe that this has been the downfall of our denomination on occasion, when we have chosen to raise the banner of a particular cause at the expense of another. Sometimes we do this without thinking, without realizing that we might be excluding others that are just as legitimate. And then there may be times when we feel as if our cause isn't getting it due because there are so many other causes. We can feel as if other people don't

care if they fail to support our cause. It's easy to lose perspective in a world that's full of causes. One of the side effects of getting wrapped up in our own causes is that we may lose sight of a larger cause, the cause of good itself.

I wonder if Jesus got so wrapped up in spending time with his disciples that he almost lost sight of his larger cause? Over the years people have been critical of Jesus in this reading from Mark for the way he responds to the woman. Because she was a Gentile of Syrophenician origin, maybe she didn't represent his cause. She wasn't a Jew, she wasn't a member of his congregation, why should he help her? Jesus says to her when she asks for help with her daughter, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Why would Jesus say this to a woman in need? Well maybe there is a deeper purpose. Namely to get his disciples to ask the same question. Could the cause of Jesus include this woman who wasn't a part of their cause? After all, she was dealing with life's side effects too.

The woman responds to Jesus by saying that even "the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." But the word for dog in the Greek, it is a word that refers to a small house dog like a smart puppy who knows there is something to be had when the children sit down to eat. She knew that Jesus represented a higher cause, not just the cause of his disciples, there was something there for her too.

And something similar happens when the deaf man is healed. Not only is the man relieved, but the crowd also experiences a change when Jesus takes on their cause. The text says that they were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well." Actually a better, if less fluid translation from the original Greek would be to say that "Jesus does good all things." The confession of the crowd, like that of the woman was one that realized that Jesus didn't just champion their cause. That Jesus championed a higher cause. He does good all things. Jesus championed the cause of good. A good meant for all and meant to be in all. Jesus is a source of unity. By taking their side effects seriously Jesus is showing that he takes the needs of everyone seriously. He works as a cause for good for all people.

You see my friends we can all have our causes that are important and important to us but Jesus is there to unite us to a bigger one. Namely the cause of good. That is what Christ embodies for us. No one else does. When we say that Jesus died on the cross for all, one of the things that we mean is that God has made each one of us a cause, because in Christ God is fully aware of the side effects of life and the need for an overarching shape of goodness

that holds us together. And in that, Jesus is more than just a cause, he becomes a real force for good in the world. More than fighting for a cause, we are called to live for Christ. As we deal with the side effects of living, and even though none of us has it all together, we together constitute in God's hands a powerful force for good and light in the world.

There is an old fable tells of trouble in a carpenter's shop. The tools were in a tizzy. A voice cried out, "Brother Hammer, you're too noisy."

"Me?" says the Hammer, "Brother Plane's work is all superficial. No depth."

"Me?" says the Plane, "Brother Rule is always telling others what to do, measuring us all by his own standards."

"Me?" says the Rule, "It's Brother Screwdriver who drives us all crazy going round in circles."

"Me?" says Screwdriver, "Sister Sandpaper always rubbing the wrong way."

"Me?" says Sandpaper, "Sister Saw goes back & forth endlessly."

Suddenly the bickering ceased, for everyone heard the carpenter coming. When he entered the shop, he put on his apron, went to his bench, and began to make a table. He picked up Brother Rule, then Brother Plane, then Brother Hammer and Sister Screwdriver, then Sister Saw, and lastly Sister Sandpaper to smooth all the rough edges.

To make one table designed to serve a world in need, all the tools were necessary. No one was more important than the others when it came to serving the cause of the Master. My friends no matter what the side-effects and no matter what the cause may it be the same for us -as individuals, as a community as a church. Amen.