

SERMON TOPIC: Spread The Gospel Message – Who Me?

Scripture: Mark 7:31-35, Acts 4:13-20 (NIV)

INTRODUCTION – A FIXATION WITH STEREOTYPES

In the world, we live in – we're used to describing and understanding it through various stereotypes. Even the church is not exempt from stereotypical perspectives! Let me list a few: Pastors must be old, white haired men. The King James Version of the Bible is more authentic than all other translations. Traditional worship services are only for the elderly.

Now we may laugh at the ridiculous nature of these stereotypes, but they do exist – and I do hope that you realize that stereotypes aren't necessarily helpful in certain situations - they limit possibilities in fact. We all know and have heard of our fair share of racial stereotypes that are just unfair to the possibilities of their achievement. Everyone is after all, an individual member of the human race, regardless of their skin colour!

JESUS DEFIES OUR PRESCRIBED STEREOTYPES

In the first Scriptural text of Mark 7:32, we read of some people who brought a man to Jesus for healing. **There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. (Mark 7:32)**

The people believed that if Jesus just laid hands on the man, he would be healed. They were fixated on this one method of healing – 'if You only lay your hands on the deaf-mute, Lord'. They prescribed their stereotypical belief to Jesus, as if this was the only way Jesus could heal!

Step one – hands on the sick. Step two – pray. Step three – voila! Healing completed.

But instead of laying His hands, Jesus chooses a unique method to heal the man. He uses spit – and I believe that it is for good reason.

After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. (Mark 7:33)

SPIT IN THE BIBLE

Spit in the Bible has a bad reputation – in fact even today, it still has! Spit or saliva is often thought to be a contaminant – the carrier of germs and bacteria! Hence, our nation's tough legislative stand against errant spitters.

In Leviticus 15:8, it is written as a priestly law that if a sick person spits on another, he must cleanse himself physically to avoid infection and will be ritually unclean until evening.

If the man with the discharge spits on someone who is clean, that person must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be unclean till evening. (Leviticus 15:8)

In Numbers 12:14, it is written about Miriam's punishment from the LORD, that like a daughter whose father had spit at her deliberately - it was meant to teach her a lesson – to serve as an outcast from Israel for the period of a week.

If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? (Numbers 12:14)

In Matthew 26:67, even the Roman soldiers are described as spitting at Jesus in an attempt to insult and humiliate him: **Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. (Matthew 26:67)**

So spit is a social taboo and negatively thought of in the biblical sense, why then does Jesus choose it?

WHY JESUS CHOSE TO USE SPIT

I believe that Jesus wanted to show them that their stereotypical fixation was erroneous. They were putting God in a box, by limiting the ways through which He could or could not work! And hence, He chooses to heal through spit.

Note that in Mark 8:22, we read of an almost identical incident: **They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. (Mark 8:22)**

And once again, in response to a fixation on a stereotypical method by which God works – Jesus proves them wrong by spitting and using it to heal the blind man! Spit is bad when it comes from our mouths – from our imperfect bodies - but when it comes from God’s mouth – there are no bacteria, no germs, and rather than being an item of insult and a contaminant – it is a healing balm!

The people must have been stunned and irked when Jesus spat saliva in both cases. Even more so, they must have gasped when He touched the deaf man’s tongue with it, and the blind man’s eyes with it. But they must have been awed struck when the spit heals both these men!

SPECIAL SPIT

How can spit, condemned by all sources, be used to heal? Yet upon careful examination, would it not point to something special about the One from whom the spit came from? What is it that makes His spit special? Perhaps the answer lies in that He is more than human - He is the Son of God.

You might be victim to a stereotypical perspective widespread amongst the Church: “I cannot evangelize because I am a new Christian, ineloquent, uneducated, very timid, not a good testimony myself.”

Friend, you may feel like spit: smelly, filthy, useless. But that’s all irrelevant when Jesus, the Son of the Most High, is the one sending you forth. In fact, He is sending ALL of us forth.

HE CAN USE ANYONE

I remember when I was in junior college, I had this classmate who was a Christian, and every time that I’d phone her – if I heard her voice on the other line, I would greet her – ‘Hello, I’m Buddhist’ - and she would reply ‘Hello, I’m Christian’ – it was our way of greeting one another.

The day came when our G.C.E. 'A' level results were released and I called her to find out how she did. My usual greeting to her was replied by one that sounded somber and sad. I told her how I did – and then proceeded to ask her how she did (insensitive, clueless boy that I was) – and she replied reluctantly with a string of 'D' grades. Stumped, I tried to console her by saying, 'Don't worry – the sky is very big, you'll find your place somewhere underneath it. And maybe God has a special plan for you?'

I did not think I did a very good job – so the best thing was to hang up quickly. Three days later, I received a letter from her. She told me how when I called that day, she was feeling really disappointed and was asking God why. She had studied really hard and still didn't get the grades she had hoped for.

But I called and when she heard me say 'God has a special plan for you.' She knew it was not clichéd because I would be the last person to quote God – being the staunch Buddhist I was. She wrote of how her tears were falling on the other side of the phone as I was rambling on – trying to console her. She knew God was speaking through me then to her.

Later, she went on to take an overseas journalism course and is today a newspaper writer. The conclusion of this story is that God used even me, when I was then still a Buddhist to do His will to comfort His beloved child. This is our amazing God. He amazes us by coming from out-of-the-box angles we would have never expected, never limited by human stereotypes.

He turns water into wine, He turns spit into healing balm and He turns the vilest of sinners into tools for His gospel. So don't say that you cannot be used by God to share the gospel – you can, when you avail yourself to Him to be changed and used.

God looks not for ability, but for availability. But we have to be intentionally purposed for God here. It is great that in moments, unconsciously we can be used by God – but we want to avail ourselves more than just momentarily – we don't want to waste a moment of our lives, living after any pursuit other than that of God's.

HOW TRANSFORMATION HAPPENS – FROM SPIT TO WORKTOOLS

The second Scriptural passage today is from Acts 4:13-20. It speaks of a situation when Peter and John were hauled before the religious authorities for preaching about Jesus and His resurrection and healing a lame man, making him walk.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13)

The first thing the religious authorities noted about Peter and John is that they had courage. However, they were not always unafraid. In Matthew 26:56, when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, they deserted Jesus and fled. They were all traitors. What happened to this 'spit'? What made them courageous?

Second, they were noted as 'unschooled, ordinary men.' They had nothing to boast of – no special charisma that attracted men towards following them in their new faction of Christianity, no special eloquence, nor religious scholastic training!

However, the third and most important observation about them is that they had 'been with Jesus'.

THE POWER OF BEING WITH JESUS – CALLED TO BE WITH HIM

When Jesus appointed the 12 apostles – it is written: **'He appointed twelve – designating them apostles – that they might be with him ...'** (Mark 3:14)

The Twelve were to be trained in ministry and in its practice – but first and foremost – they were to be in fellowship, with Jesus Himself. I believe they were called primarily to accompany Jesus throughout the three years of His ministry from their time of appointment – not because Jesus would be lonely, but more so because He wanted them to model after Him.

Through witnessing visually what Jesus was like, audibly listening to all He said – how He reacted in situations, how He faced obstacles, and enemies, what He held as important, how He viewed life and God – they were to learn from all these.

Observing and listening to a person daily for a period of time help you learn a lot about that person, as compared to just encountering the person occasionally. In couple counselling sessions, I notice that how successfully couples understand each other or resolve their conflicts can be influenced by how often they see one another. Couples who date but see each other only 3 times a week at 2 hours each, will not have the exposure to the varied situations a couple who sees each other every day for 5 hours.

Many authors have tried to diagnose the leadership training methods of Jesus – ascribing various patterns to His modus operandi – but I believe that there was primarily just one way by which Jesus trained His followers – simply by being with Him.

And the disciples were not just with Jesus until the point in Gethsemane – Jesus deliberately sought them out after His Resurrection, intending for them to continue being with Him for a certain period of time. They were to learn from Him pre-Crucifixion and post-Resurrection!

BEING WITH JESUS - TODAY

Have you been with Jesus? When was the last time that you were with Jesus? I don't mean going to church and sitting there – but rather I mean observing what He does in today's world, in your life today, at what He did in the Bible in the past – listening to His words in the Bible and His instructions for you today.

When was the last time? Because if you have been there with Jesus, your faith journey will be transformed. Though you are like spit, like what Peter and John used to be – useless, scared, unqualified – you will become a transformed person, a disciple of God used by Him.

GENUINE VS. COUNTERFEIT

There is a difference between God and all other gods in the world. The Holy Scriptures speak of Him as the ONE God, and all others are false. If that is the case, there must be a difference for those who follow after Him, since He is genuine; the one True God.

All the TRAC pastors were in Penang recently for our pastors' annual retreat. As we were travelling to our hotel by coach, the agency guide told us about a particular shopping centre we passed. He said that we could find all kinds of branded goods and clothing at a very cheap price. But as for clothing, he told us we should buy one size larger as they would shrink to the correct size after washing - The products were pirate copies of the original.

That is the thing about original, genuine articles. They are supposed to be able to possess certain qualities superior to other flawed copies. And I believe that is my God. He will not fade when our faith is run under water. He will not shrink in the face of adversity. He will not wear out under frequent use.

REAL FAITH – NOT EMPTY RELIGION

I have noticed that in many religions, people do not know the gods they worship. They know what the god does – the god of fertility, the god of the sea. If you sacrifice something to the god, he will give you good fortune. But they do not know their god personally - what that god is like, the stories about what that god did.

If you are a Christian, the main thing you are called to do is to know your God personally. Be on first name terms with Him. Don't treat God like a vending machine – knowing only what He can do – know who He is. Because when you do – your faith will not be a counterfeit one, but one that is from the Genuine article – touched by God Himself.

EVANGELISM - A NATURAL RESPONSE FROM BEING WITH HIM

Peter says in **Acts 4:20: For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.** Realizing who God is personally leads us to become natural witnesses to His goodness.

I am a faithful user of Dettol soap. In a world whereby people are moving on to aromatic, moisturizing and skin toning liquid soaps, I am sticking with classic Dettol soap bars. I was first sold on the wonderful cleansing properties of Dettol soap during my army days. After my days of field exercises, days spent without bathing, Dettol has always kept me clean, without itch and infection. Now the love of soap is subjective. But God is not.

Logically speaking – there can only be one true God, one true faith – because as we examine the different faiths, they all teach different things. We all have to come to one conclusion ourselves. And when we do, we will know if we chose the genuine article - because God is real and has stood the test of all time. Just like how I believe in Dettol, those who really know God – will talk about God to those around them. It is a natural reaction of someone who knows and truly believes in the goodness of God.

A CASE STUDY – AEROBICS, OUR JOURNEY

Over the past month, something new has happened at BMC. We started a ladies aerobics class. It began when I visited a ladies group that met regularly on a Tuesday morning – and they were telling me about their past week and how some of them were going to gym. That's when we broached the topic of how popular exercise was amongst ladies and the idea of a ladies aerobics class as a form of community outreach began to brew.

It took a couple of months to find a qualified aerobics instructor and decide on how the classes were to be run. But finally the things were ready, and the pamphlets were distributed all over our neighbouring Eastwood community. And 16 ladies signed up!

What was really amazing was how I witnessed this ladies group develop and grow throughout this period. They started out a little shy and unsure. But here they are – exercising on Fridays, and reaching out to the ladies in our community. During the very first session, they were getting to know the other ladies, and by the end of the first session, they were talking about parent support groups in schools, recipes and exchanging contact numbers!

You see, we may feel worried about what we can or cannot do – but when you put your heart to want to be God's tool in telling the world about Him. I believe He will honor that desire.

CONCLUSION

We started off studying that Jesus uses unusual means, such as spit, to point others to who he is – the Son of God. Similarly, the sinners Jesus uses to do His work in this world will also end up pointing to who He is. The world will wonder in puzzlement at how this is possible, and it is our prayer their puzzlement and amazement will lead to questions that lead to faith.

There are three groups of people I wish to address:

First, perhaps **evangelism or sharing the gospel has always been difficult for you**. If that is you today, ask God to come by you with firstly His reassurances that His grace is sufficient for your weakness in this situation. Secondly ask that you may be used by Him in the coming week, so that you might know through Christ, you can do all things – and that includes being bold to share the gospel.

Second, perhaps **you feel so far away from God and feel unworthy like spit and cannot even imagine what it must be like to be loved or used by God**, know that God loves you immensely and will never despise your contrite and repentant heart. Come unto Him and He will give your hurting heart rest indeed.

Third, **perhaps you have been God's worker and have labored for His cause, but you have become tired, distracted and not been with Jesus for a while**, come and sit at Jesus' feet once again. Let this be a time for you to be transformed and inspired to be a spokesperson for our God once again.

Here is the challenge – Think about someone. For the next 7 months, I want you to pray for this person, talk to this person, care for this person and invite this person to come to know Jesus.

Sermon Text by Rev Joel Yong