
Speaking the ‘Sigh Language’ of the Body

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Breaking through the barriers, the Gospel of Mark

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus encounters several people straining to find ways to engage Jesus for healing. One cluster of helpers (Mark 2:1-12) sought to bring a loved one to Jesus, someone who perhaps couldn't feed or dress himself, let alone be able to walk. His support group wanted to enrich his spiritual connection, so they strove to meet Jesus. Because of the inaccessibility of the gathering place, they were forced to put their faith into creative mode, deciding that *faithfulness is far more important than propriety*. Since this entourage of four carriers bearing a paralyzed man on a pallet couldn't get in the door, they broke a hole in the roof and lowered their friend into the meeting space.

Mark relates this story with vivid immediacy, telling us explicitly that Jesus looked up at the rooftop-four and saw *their faith*. No words were spoken, nor were their beliefs or doctrines questioned. “Faith” was not listed as a prerequisite for the man with paralysis. Instead, “faith” could be construed as the rooftop friends’ passionate desire and expression for mercy. Then Jesus used their intrusion as a teaching moment for all present. He pronounced forgiveness to the paralytic (rather than the expected “be healed”), and the congregants became engaged in conversation about the barriers to forgiveness.

There are other Gospel examples of how an “obstacle” became a creative occasion for faith conversation: a woman secretly reaches for Jesus’ robe (Mark 5:24-34) to avoid discussions of Levitical restrictions; the Syrophenician mother’s feisty argument cuts through a cultural wall (Mark 7:24-30); and the “Gerasene demoniac” (Mark 5:1-20) certainly challenges propriety with a chain rattling, noisy encounter with Jesus.

Speaking the language of Sign and Sigh, Mark 7

The healing of a man with hearing and speech problems (Mark 7:31-37) held some interest for me in seminary, since I was dabbling in sign language (ASL). The man, brought to Jesus by friends, was deaf and had a speech impediment. Similar to the Mark 2 account, there are persistent *friends* bringing this man to the mercy of Jesus, and no test of faith was required.

The Mark account became more graphic personally following my seminary graduation. For a year I was waiting for a parish call,

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and was struggling, thirsty for purpose and hope. A friend who was deaf realized that I was lax in regular worship and invited me to his congregation, Holy Cross Lutheran Church for the Deaf (St. Louis). Participating in this congregation of predominantly deaf members became an oasis. Their hospitality and care filled my need and opened my eyes to how the Gospel can be expressed in other-than-spoken ways. It also taught me the valuable pastoral lesson of being a *recipient* of the Gospel, not only a *purveyor*.

The Sunday that the Mark 7 lesson was used I was entranced, startled to “hear” it through sign language. Casual interpretations of the narrative concentrate on Jesus’ healing abilities, with a focus on the peculiar spitting, touching of ears, and groaning. Invariably explanations can wander into “spit” being utilized in some ancient rituals, and parallels of touching the eyes of the blind man with mud. Focus is drawn to (unique in Mark) Jesus’ expression in Aramaic: *Ephphatha*.

I saw the account anew through American Sign Language. Jesus deliberately moved the man away, alone, from the gawking crowd (people who are deaf are often aware of “gawkers”). Then Jesus’ physical gestures could be construed as rudimentary sign language: touching the *tongue* to indicate speech, and the *ears* for hearing. Most importantly, Jesus acknowledges and communicates *with this individual* (a parallel to the conversation with the demoniac in Mark 5).

Next, Jesus shared a basic prayer *for and with the man, using a form of “sigh” intercession*. Jesus’ first verbalization is a groan; he *sighs*. The word (*stenaxw*/ στεναξω) is used several times in the New Testament.

Paul respects *sighing* as a form of spiritual communication. For example, in 2 Cor 5:2-4, *groaning* is our language while “in this tent,” desiring to wear heavenly clothing. And we all share in a collective *groan* with creation while awaiting our full redemption and adoption (Rom 8:23). Most remarkably, Paul introduces us to the Spirit’s ability to assist us in our limited vocabulary (Rom 8:26), where “...that very Spirit intercedes for the saints with sighs too deep for words:” *sigh language*.¹

Watching (“hearing”) the lesson in ASL allowed me to perceive the story from a new perspective. It still remains ironic to me that I needed to *hear* the lesson from the sign (and sigh) of the deaf community to realize that Jesus attempts to speak to and for us through the challenges of our own disabilities.

Realizing language beyond words

Our firstborn son, Jim, provided the next stage for learning to communicate beyond profound disability. Three years into our marriage and living in Harrah, Oklahoma, Jim was born to my wife, Judy, and me. Within days he contracted viral meningial encephalitis, resulting in severe visual, aural, and cognitive barriers. Several years later, the state of Oklahoma graciously sent us to a workshop in Florida for parents seeking to communicate with deaf/blind children. I was intrigued and energized through a lecture on the seven stages of pre-verbal communication by a professor from Kansas.² The teacher opened our awareness to other stimuli (i.e., touch and focus, cries and laughs) we were taught that responding to, or creating interaction with, the outside world were forms of communication.

Crisis can be a breeding ground for creative energy: how would Judy and I communicate our love and care to Jim beyond regular vocabulary? For the pastoral call inside me, how would I connect with Jim to “proclaim the good news” despite his profound limitations?

1. I wish to thank Dr. Rick Carlson for helping me see the “sigh” connection between Mark 7 and Romans 8.

2. I have since had conversation with Dr. Nancy Brady from the University of Kansas. She informed me, and sent the following chart, that research has recognized Twelve Stages of Pre-Verbal Communication. Thank you, Dr. Brady! (See chart below.)

Twelve Stages of Pre-verbal Communication

No.	Definition	Communication level
0	No response	
1	Alerting: a change in behavior or stops doin a behavior	Preintentional
2	Single orientation only: on an object, event or person; can be communicationed through vision, body orientation or other means.	Preintentional
3	Single orientation only plus 1 other PCB (potentially communicative behavior)	Preintentional
4	Single orientation only plus more than 1 PCB	Preintentional
5	Dual orientation: shift in focus between a person and an object, between a person and an event using vision, body orientation, etc. (without PCB)	Preintentional
6	Triadic orientation: e.g., eye gaze or touch from object to person and back	Intentional Non-symbolic
7	Dual orientation plus 1 PCB: e.g., dual focus plus gesture	Intentional Non-symbolic
8	Dual orientation plus 2 or more PCB: e.g., dual focus plus gesture plus vocalization, switch closure	Intentional Non-symbolic
9	Triadic orientation plus 1 PCB: e.g., triadic plus vocalization	Intentional Non-symbolic
10	Triadic orientation plus more than 1 PCB: e.g., triadic plus vocalization and differential switch closure	Intentional Non-symbolic
11	One-word verbalization, sign or AAC symbol selection	Intentional Symbolic
12	Multi-word verbalization, sign or AAC symbol selection	Intentional Symbolic

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When I returned from Florida and shared these insights with fellow clergy, Pr. Norb Kabelitz (+) quipped about five basic phonemes that could be almost universally understood: *ow, wow, ah, uh-oh, aha*. Norb even creatively connected them with church seasons: Advent (*uh-oh*), Christmas (*ahh*), Epiphany (*aha*), Lent (*ow*) and Easter (*wow*).³

As Jim grew, we enjoyed the opportunities to learn and to engage in Jim’s modes of communication. But ultimately, we needed further assistance to care for Jim. We moved to Kearney, Nebraska, and entered into life with Bethphage Mission (now *Mosaic, Bethphage Village*) in nearby Axtell. The chaplains at Bethphage were marvelous and caring during our first ten years of Jim living there. But then my moment also came to share in ministry with Jim and ninety-nine other “guests” in Axtell, when the community needed a new chaplain. My congregation, Family of Christ in nearby Kearney, graciously extended my call as their pastor to include pastoral ministry at Bethphage Village.

It was initially requested that my task be to “train the

3. Uh Oh, Ah, Aha, Ow, Wow

Uh Oh—is a “repentance” utterance, recognizing brokenness. This is one of the themes of Advent texts.

AH—breathed when we receive and hold an unexpected gift. This can be found in the “awe” of Christmas.

AHA—usually expresses awareness; “This is my Son, beloved” starts, and concludes, the expanding awareness of God’s surprising activity through Jesus during Epiphany.

OW—said when hurt happens; that hurt can be done to, or through, us. Lent is the season for “confessing” the hurts, that even Jesus bears.

WOW—is the exclamation of praise responding to moments of joy. And the proclamation of the Risen Christ, Easter, elicits joy.

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Bethphage folk so they could be mainstreamed into typical church services”: to accommodate *the person with disabilities* into the context of traditional worship and learning, with ramps, adaptive equipment for hearing and/or seeing, and special education material. While all the efforts were laudable, there was usually less time and energy focused on learning and sharing communication with these same individuals. *Renewal for the whole body of Christ was overlooked, as well as the gifts the individuals could offer to the whole community.*

Upon reflection, we decided that our ministry at Bethphage should move toward a more innovative task: learn the language and liturgy as expressed by the individuals we serve and engage in teaching that “language” to the rest of the Body of Christ. This renewed goal allowed us to put aside the idea that our purpose was to “explain” faith and worship life to the participants in the chapel worship service. Rather than assuming individuals with speech, hearing, cognitive or social disabilities were *lacking in liturgical expression*, we instead needed to learn *their language*. They already bore existential articulations of lament, loneliness, separation, guilt, and anxiety, as well as expressions of joy, praise, and enlightenment. Or in Pastor Kabelitz’s more basic phonemes: *Uh-oh* (judgment and guilt), *Aw* (gift and grace), *Aha* (enlightenment), *Ow* (lament), and *Wow* (joy and praise).

Learning the language of worship

Adapting the Psalms for our worship became an immediate adventure. Rather than attempting to have our participants learn and recite phrases for a litany, we shared in simple responses that encouraged all of us to engage with the mood of the psalm. For example, the community could collectively *sigh* “Ahh” to the lines of Psalm 23:

- The Lord, my shepherd, makes me lie down in good pasture... *Ahh.*
- ...even when we walk through scary valleys, where fear and death lurk, You keep us moving with your presence and staff. *Ahh.*

Or we could join a lively chorus of “uh-oh” to a paraphrase of Psalm 15

- Who can enter into the holy house? Those who always do what is right (*Uh-oh*)
- ...those who never say anything mean about someone else (*uh-oh*).

Psalm 90 became a “counting litany,” and we have several congregants who love to assist in leading the refrain:

- We are small compared to the size of creation... “1,2,3: **Lord, have mercy.**”
- We realize our frequent fickle mistakes... “1,2,3: **Lord, have mercy.**”
- And then there is the brevity of our years: count them! 70? 80? “1,2,3: **Lord, have mercy.**”
- But finally, we are encouraged to focus on enumerating God’s blessings; “1,2,3: **Lord, have mercy.**”

My Kearney congregation was gracious in allowing experimentation with some of these same responses in their church services. The gathering appreciated (well, most of them) closing their hymnals, and learning from our *Mosaic* brothers and sisters to *sigh* rather than speak, Psalm 23. We became aware of the power of allowing worshippers to *participate* in the psalms in basic ways rather than scrambling to find the notes of the psalm tone. Of course, we still enjoyed singing the psalm, but the different psalmody gave another “hearing,” courtesy of fellow disciples who can only sigh rather than sing.

The *Mosaic* community also learned ways to engage in physical liturgical motions in conjunction with our pre-verbal liturgy. While attempting to translate traditional liturgy into this community’s worship life, motion and physical interaction offered a renewed meaning for all of us involved.

For example, the traditional Trinitarian invocation: during one of my early worship services, I constructed a giant PVC triangle to explain (naively!) about the *Trinity*. It didn’t take long to perceive

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the futility of attempting to “teach *about*” the Trinity. (Nor did it help that some of my assistants pointed to the unequal sides being doctrinally heretical.) However, when the triangle was placed *around* several individuals, with the explanation that we were here *in* the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, smiles and excitement started to rise. The reaction of the individuals surprised me! They took the triangle from me and started “welcoming” others. The PVC doctrinal-triangle morphed into an elaborate tool of hospitality. I began to understand how they were hearing that invocation, the “Trinitarian formula,” as a promise that we can all be embraced *within* God’s name. The triangle has become a staple for each Mosaic worship service, with a rather lengthy time spent in welcoming. The opening of worship does become a little messy, but faithfulness is far more important than propriety.

The experience taught me to look for the deeper existential vocabulary of all our worship actions; sometimes it can be clouded by our typical practice of maintaining perfunctory form. I thought of our traditional worship services and the invocation. All recipients of the greeting are just as needy to hear, and maybe physically see, that God’s gracious activity seeks to surround and embrace us.

Barbara Newman, in *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship*, shares wonderful insights on how traditional worship practices can be interpreted in simpler language and understanding.⁴ At the same time, *simpler* does not mean *simplistic*. Taking the step toward translating our rich liturgical heritage and action to basic utterances enhances the meaning and activity of worship for all the people of God. There are times that the whole body of Christ needs to *sigh* beyond words.

A Liturgy of Ow and Wow

A Lenten/Easter experience captures this desire. *Tearing paper* is a favorite activity of some of the Mosaic congregation, which we incorporated into our Lenten liturgy. I wrapped a large box in decorative paper, designated as a “confession” box. Individuals were then invited to share in a “*Confession of the Ow’s in life*”; each would have an opportunity to rip a piece of paper and place it in the box, with some lament, such as “ow” or “Lord, have mercy.” If desired, words or marks could be added on the piece of paper, using a marker. We assisted many who were not able to participate

4. Barbara Newman. *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship* (Wyoming, Michigan: CLC Network, 2005) talks about VERTICAL HABITS (pages 39-73), the faithful worship habits that should be offered to all who are part of the Body of Christ (although we may need to find other sensory ways to assist people in participating in this). Newman takes the “liturgical/theological” title and converts it to an accessible, understandable, spiritual practice. I’ve reversed her titles.

- Praise (Love You...)
- Confession (I’m sorry)
- Lament (Why)
- Illumination (I’m Listening)
- Petition (Help)
- Gratitude (Thank You)
- Service (What Can I Do?)
- Blessing (Bless You)

Lent is about God taking the “ow” of life: things we have done wrong, hurts we have endured, or feelings related to “brokenness” in the world. The lessons for Lent offer a variety of alternatives for expressing “ow,” personal or corporate.

alone, but still gave each person a moment to place their ow into the Confession Box. An explanation was provided that Lent is about God taking the “ow” of life: things we have done wrong, hurts we have endured, or feelings related to “brokenness” in the world. The lessons for Lent offer a variety of alternatives for expressing “ow,” personal or corporate.

By Holy Week, Jesus’ journey to the cross embraces our “ow” in the Passion: in betrayal, aloneness, injustice, physical pain, crucifixion, even feeling separated from God. By Good Friday, a cross was “entombed” in the Confession Box. All of this was done while reading Hebrews 4:14-16, with an explanation that Jesus “takes our ow’s.”

Easter required additional preparation. The Lenten activity, resulting in lots of torn up paper was made into a giant mosaic. Confirmation students and older youth enjoyed assisting, secretly using the torn paper to cover a giant butterfly. They then glued the word “WOW” across the wings. The form was then placed back in the box, along with the cross. During the Easter worship, we held the Confession Box while telling the story of the women who had come to the tomb with tears in their eyes; they still felt the “ow” of Jesus’ death. After reminding everyone how their “ow’s” were sealed with Jesus during Lent, we then continued to explain that the women found the tomb opened. Finally, we opened the Confession Box with amazement, delightfully finding the cross and the butterfly mosaic. God has transformed the death of Jesus and changed it into resurrection. The Lord turned “ow” to “wow”!

In the Kearney congregation, we shared this Lenten confession (“*Just Say Ow*”) during children’s sermon time. An invitation was extended to the congregation members, if desired, to tear paper as they came forward for communion. I was wonderfully surprised with how many in the worshiping flock took moments to offer their silent confession (some with tears), and then rend paper as a sacred gesture before communing. For me, it was a realization that I would not or could not hear each and all of their confessions: instead, through my Mosaic brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ, we had created an opportunity for that entire congregation to *sigh with the Spirit*. The theological conversation took an even livelier turn at Easter when some members observed, “God doesn’t necessarily get rid of our “ow’s”, but instead transforms them!”

Learning to use this language in Zoom

During this Covid pandemic, our Mosaic worship services have been placed online. While online visual platforms severely limit the physical participation and expression of more challenged individuals, a side benefit is that we have developed Zoom presence with our national Mosaic ministries in thirteen states. The services have a unique liturgical rubric, with a spirited attempt to be interactive through Zoom. In the process, we have witnessed inspired moments from this extended body of Christ, with experiences in which I wish the whole church could participate (HIPPA concerns preclude that!). For example, Gary's full-throated song, "I'm gonna sing when the Spirit says sing," concludes our service. Kayla's litany, "Let them be loved!" takes a special meaning after Jesus' admonition to "Love your enemies." Individuals online hold out their hands to "catch the blessing" when Pr. Eric Spruth-Janssen (Chaplain with Mosaic in Beatrice, Nebraska) signals our need to carry the benediction with us. (By the way, this, too, was delightful to do in our traditional setting, and have congregants gleefully holding out their arms for a hallowed sendoff.) It has been particularly moving to have some Mosaic participants share their insights online, like when Shantii offered her devotional poetry in response to worship. One poem⁵ that came forth:

My Father's Voice

As the rain falls,
I hear God's voice
is very clear
His children are
his to hold
And care for
I am not a bore,
Never sore
In my core,
He is my father
But I am not
His only daughter
To hear my father's voice
Is a choice.

We were blessed that Shantii voiced her prayer. Expressed within the poem is that *sigh*, "I am not a bore." Yet she responds with an openness to help others hear God's voice. And what does the voice say? I think it sighs a continued *epiphatha* for the full Body of Christ to be open to hearing and speaking in renewed ways.

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5. Shantii Haase is a resident at the Mosaic program in Beatrice, Nebraska, and regularly shares poetic thoughts within our Zoom services. Permission was granted for use of her poetry.