

“I don’t want to hear it.” That was my mother’s way of ending a conversation when we children would keep pushing her. I’ve found that phrase useful myself, preventing the discussion from moving forward. So we can selectively hear; we can, as they say, become conveniently deaf.

But what about inconvenient deafness, when we simply cannot hear. We know from communities in the Washington area, such as Gallaudette, how people have to work around this limitation, often developing extraordinary compensation through other senses. Jesus’ healing in the Gospel directly echoes Isaiah’s prophecy in the first reading: a sign of God’s presence and victory comes in the restoration of all those things that cripple and hinder us.

Everyone knows the name Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh is best remembered as a troubled, but highly talented post-impressionist painter who died at the age of 37, perhaps at his own hand. His best-known work is titled, “Starry Night.” But let me tell you some things about Vincent van Gogh that you may not know.

Did you know that Vincent van Gogh was drawn toward the Christian ministry at an early age? In the winter of 1878, van Gogh volunteered to move to an impoverished coal mine in the south of Belgium, a place where pastors were usually sent as punishment. He preached and ministered to the sick, and also drew pictures of the miners and their families, who called him the “Christ of the Coal Mines.” As a missionary to these miners, van Gogh identified with them in a powerful way. He lived as simply as they did. He gave away his good clothing to the poor and dressed in shabby clothing. One day, a baker’s wife with whom he had boarded saw him and asked why he had given away his good clothing. Vincent van Gogh replied, “I am a friend of the poor like Jesus was.”

Not impressed, the baker’s wife told him, “You are no longer normal.” (1)

Van Gogh’s governing body in the church agreed with the baker’s wife. They disagreed with van Gogh’s lifestyle and refused to renew his contract. He was forced to find another occupation. And so, I suppose, it was then Vincent devoted himself to art. That baker’s wife was correct, though. Vincent van Gogh was not normal. He was a troubled young man whose life was filled with sorrow. But what does it mean to be normal? She said he wasn’t normal because he tried to follow Jesus. Is that bad? Well, if you truly try to be all that Christ calls you to be, I suspect that she was right--you will be anything but normal.

Isn’t this basically what the majority of us seek--to be considered normal, to fit in, to be accepted? Perhaps the meanest thing you can say to another person in our super-conformist culture is, “You are not normal.” I wonder, however, if the world will ever be changed for the better by people whose greatest ambition is to fit in, to be accepted--in other words, to be normal.

Being abnormal is not always bad. Do you think Albert Einstein was normal? It is said that Einstein shuffled in the streets of New York in his bedroom slippers and communicated intelligibly with only a few close acquaintances. He was so absent-minded, it is said, that his wife had to cut his food at dinner to keep him from slicing off a finger. His memory was so bad he could not remember names, dates and phone numbers. He had no car of his own and never learned how to drive. He didn’t like to wear socks. And yet he is one of the most celebrated scientists who ever lived. Is it bad to be abnormal?

Do you think Warren Buffett is normal? Buffet is, of course, one of the richest men in the world. Listen how Dan Miller described Buffet in his 2008 book, *No More Dreaded Mondays*: “He runs his \$136 billion company, Berkshire Hathaway Inc., from a small office in Omaha with the notable absence of a computer. He shuns meetings and spent most of a recent Wednesday working on new lyrics to “Love Me Tender” for a birthday party for his friend Bill Gates. Despite having substantial stakes in Coca-Cola, Wells Fargo, American Express, and countless other companies, Berkshire has no public relations, human resources, or legal departments. Its headquarters is staffed by just seventeen employees. Mr. Buffett occasionally carries a cell phone but does not use one when he’s in his home city. He keeps no calculator on his desk, preferring to do most calculations in his head . . .” (2)

Is that normal behavior for a business person--no computer, no calculator, and Heaven forbid, no cell phone? Some of us would just die if we didn’t have a cell phone. Is Warren Buffet normal?

Do you think Mother Teresa was normal? That would be easier for you to answer. I think most of us agree that no normal person would make the sacrifices that this little nun made. That’s why she is a saint. So is it bad to be abnormal? Not if you’re willing to pay the price.

Would you agree with me that it’s all right to be abnormal if in doing so you change the world? Let’s go one step further. Would you agree with me that it would be all right to be abnormal if it meant you left your little part of the world a better place?

Let me tell you about an ordinary man who was at the same time abnormal.

Many years ago when author Steven Mosley was teaching at an English school in Japan, he met a young woman named Yasuko. Yasuko’s family had a history of abandonment and broken relationships. Her father died when she was young, and her mother, who had never experienced love and security in her life, was not able to pass on these qualities of love and security to Yasuko. After Yasuko became a Christian, she struggled to understand and accept God’s love for her.

One day, Yasuko ran into one of her father’s old friends. He began sharing with Yasuko one very special memory. Her father had often thrown wild parties when she was a child at which he became quite drunk. Whenever he got drunk, he would start giving away whatever food he found in the pantry. This was right after the war, when jobs were scarce and hunger and poverty stalked their town. Most of the men at these parties would have starved if it hadn’t been for Yasuko’s father’s drunken generosity.

After the man left, Yasuko’s mother told her the truth: her father never drank alcohol. In Japanese culture, accepting charity is a form of dishonor. If her father had given his friends food, they would have been too ashamed to accept it. But under the guise of his “drunken” parties, he was able to help his friends and keep them from “losing face.” He had made himself look foolish in order to protect his friends’ pride. In her father’s sacrifice, Yasuko began to understand the love of a God who gave up His own power and died to save us from our sins. If her father had acted normally, many of his friends would have gone hungry. (3) Let me ask again: Is it so bad to be abnormal?

Our lesson for the day comes from the Epistle of James. It reads like this: “My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man

wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

"Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"

Now wouldn't you agree that what James is describing is quite normal behavior in our society, and even, heaven forbid, in the church? Wealthy folks are treated differently than poor folks. The top 1% are catered to unmercifully; the bottom 1% are shunned, called irresponsible, blamed for their own misery. The top 1% live lives of opulence; they are worth millions and even billions of dollars, yet are taxed less, proportionally, than the rest of us. Meanwhile those at the bottom of society are criticized as welfare queens when they live on a little more than nine hundred dollars a month to provide for their families. When a wealthy person comes into the room they get the best seat in the house while the poor person is left out in the cold. Wouldn't you agree that this is considered quite normal behavior in our society?

You may have heard about the report in the New York Times earlier this year that statistically both the poor and the middle-class in the United States are falling behind the poor and the middle-class in Canada and Western Europe. Twenty years ago, the bottom half of our society was the envy of the world. Not now. The recession has had a devastating effect on those who can afford it least. Overall, our society fared fairly well this past decade. That is only because the figures include those at the top who are doing extremely well.

Now I will have to be careful or some of you will accuse me of promoting class warfare. I'm not. I'm simply stating what is considered normal in our society. I am very much aware that many at the bottom of society act irresponsibly with their resources. That's one reason they have a problem rising through the economic ranks.

A new pastor was told that they had a fund called the Emergency Fund that had about \$100 in it. They told their young pastor he could use it at his discretion, provided he dispensed the money according to the conditions which the parish council of the church had set. So, he asked, "What are the conditions?" The chairman of the committee said, "You are not to give the money to anybody who is in need as a result of laziness, drunkenness, or poor management." "Well, what else is there?" Then he adds, "Far as I know, they still have that money." (4)

Do you understand that it is not the poor who are on trial, but those who follow Jesus? The author of James isn't writing to the government about its attitudes toward the poor. He isn't writing to the poor to chastise them about how they use their money. He's writing to us in the church and he's asking us whether we pass judgment on people according to their economic status, a practice that, regrettably, is quite normal.

"Money talks. Threads talk. Clothes talk. People treat you differently when you are dressed in a certain way. You experience that every day and so do I." (5) And we do. It's normal in our society. We have two different standards. We assume that people who have wealth deserve it, even if they inherited their wealth or they started their work life with a Harvard education and the financial backing of their family.

What James is saying to us this day is that following Jesus calls us to an abnormal attitude toward people. We are to see all people as Jesus sees them--as loved, as

worthy, as important in the Kingdom of God.

Let me tell you about a woman named Violet. In 1932, in the heart of the depression Violet married a union organizer and within a few years had four sons. When she was pregnant a fifth time, gangsters moved to take over the union, and her husband left, feeling his family was safer without him.

Violet and her sons moved into a tiny apartment, and a few months later, a daughter was born. To feed her family, Violet worked days at the National Silver Company and nights at a drugstore. She would work, have bouillon for lunch, finish her first job, pick up a kidney for twenty-five cents and make soup. She would tell the children not to mind the taste, go to the second job, come home and wash out the children's socks and shirts, catch a couple of hours of sleep, and begin her next day. On days off, she waited tables, and holidays, she worked at a department store.

Over the years she worked in a cracker factory, hawked ice cream, labeled medicine bottles, cleaned offices, and pushed a coffee cart. In 1959 she became an orderly in a home for the aged, and seventeen years later she retired with a pension of \$31.78 a month. For the first time since 1946 she had a week off. Thomas, her son, perhaps paid her the highest tribute possible, saying he had only "happy memories" of his childhood. As he put it, "We didn't even know we were poor until years later." (7)

Violet and her family are part of the "working poor." A few of you, particularly among our older members may have come from families like that. Be careful when you say the poor are undeserving, irresponsible, lazy. Many of them, even today, are just like Violet—working two shifts, trying to do the best they can to take care of those whom they love. They deserve our admiration, not our scorn—and, where possible, even our help. James writes, "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. . . . If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

"Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" That's an abnormal way of looking at life, but that is the Jesus way. But think of it this way: it's not normal for the Son of God to give his life for our sins. Thank God, Jesus was abnormal. If he was, we wouldn't have a chance.

The Gospel has some graphic imagery; we should not cringe when we hear it: Jesus sticks his finger in the ear of this deaf man. Jesus puts spit on his finger and puts it into this man's muted mouth. It's as if Jesus says I'm giving you directly what I have; when I touch you, I can change you. Makes us wonder, doesn't it, if we would want the spit of Jesus in our mouths? Would we want to be touched this way by him?

But look what happens at Communion—it's not Jesus' spit, but his very being—our Catholic theology says "body, blood, soul, and divinity"—poured into us as food and drink. It's an even more intimate interchange with God through Jesus than the Gospel shows us today. If Jesus could liberate that deaf and mute man, helping him know the liberating power of God, then what kind of liberation is Jesus inviting us to? What kind of hearing? What kind of speaking?

1. Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan, Vincent van Gogh: Portrait of an Artist, p. 22. Cited in David Bruce, 250 Anecdotes About Religion: Volume 2 (Kindle edition).
2. (New York: Broadway Books 2008).
3. Steven Mosley, Secrets of the Mustard Seed (Colorado Springs, CO.: NavPress, 2002), pp. 27-28.
4. Craddock Stories (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).
5. http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_james_clothes_talk_money_talks.htm.
6. Bill Hybels. The God You're Looking For (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), p. 112.
7. God's Devotional Book for Mothers (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries, 2005), p. 63.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” goes the old folk saying. We’ve all heard it. We all know it. Except that’s not what the proverb originally was. The true proverb read, “Care killed the cat.” So where did this new phrase come from? Why the revision? And what did the original phrase mean?

On 23 December 1912, a printed reference to the new variation of the proverb was printed in *The Titusville Herald* newspaper in a grocery store ad:

*You will find greater values here. We are told:
"Curiosity killed the cat,
But satisfaction brought it back."*

*It is the same story with groceries.
"Prices will sell Groceries, but it is always finality that brings the buyer back."*

The sales pitch indicated that although curiosity may provoke a buyer to try something new, the quality of the product and how much they like it is what will make them keep coming back to buy it again and again.

Earlier than that, an Irish newspaper from 1868 wrote:

"They say curiosity killed a cat once."

The phrase "Curiosity killed the cat" also appears in James Allan Mair's 1873 compendium *A Handbook of Proverbs: English, Scottish, Irish, American, Shakesperean, and Scriptural; and Family Mottoes*, where it is listed as an Irish proverb. In the 1902 edition of *Proverbs: Maxims and Phrases* by John Hendricks Bechtel, the phrase "Curiosity killed the cat" is the lone entry under the topic "Curiosity."

So, by the late 1800s, the phrase had firmly altered from Care to Curiosity.

And from there, parents and grandparents began to use the phrase not as a positive in trying new things but as a warning to curious children to check their desire to delve into things that could harm them or cause them trouble.

So what was the original phrase about?

The original phrase, “Care killed the cat” comes much earlier from the 1500s, in which the meaning was that sorrow or worry could keep one from doing what needed to be done. The cat who plays with the mouse instead of doing what needed to be done may lose it and not have dinner.

This phrase, as you might guess, comes across as just the opposite of the phrase as we use it today. For those who needed to work hard to make a living and who needed to get through life’s difficulties and sorrows while still doing what needed to be done to move forward, the phrase was meant as a boost into action.

“Don’t tarry. Don’t spend time crying over spilt milk, we might say today. Just pick yourself up and move on. There’s no time to lose. Or you may lose your livelihood or your opportunity to keep things afloat.”

“Don’t drown in your sorrows. Don’t procrastinate. Get to it. Just get it done.” These are all kinds of meanings that the original phrase suggests.

As culture changes, language changes, and this phrase is a good example of a move in our culture from a positive view of taking risks to a negative view of taking risks....and back again. While our grandparents or even our parents may have warned us to be more cautious because “curiosity killed the cat,” today’s culture has returned to a more healthy view of risk taking. In fact, most health professionals will tell you that worry and stress can actually kill you!

Our new emphasis on healthy living perhaps might bring the original phrase back into vogue: “Care killed the cat.” For us as human beings living in a hectic 21st century world, and for the church living in a time of stasis and often fear of its own culture, the original phrase might be the mantra of the 21st century:

“Care killed the cat!” So, grab the tiger by the tail and take a chance! Do something fun and new. Reach out and partner up! Take a risk. Try a new approach.

For us today, curiosity to us most of the time seems like a good thing most of the time. It’s what drives us forward and keeps us chafing at the bit to learn and grow, to share and connect with each other.

Care for us on the other hand, while caring is good, care in the sense of worry and anxiety causes us terrible stress. Not only that, worrying and fretting lead to inaction. Worry leads to feelings of uselessness, hopelessness, and disillusionment with one’s situation. One who is caught in the claws of excess worry literally freezes and cannot move forward. It’s often a circular funnel of inaction and stasis that paralyzes one from making one’s situation better.

So how do we become curious. I believe it has a lot to do with faith.

Faith propels us into action. Faith causes us to seek out a solution, assistance, or to find hope that things can change for the better. Faith gives us hope that when we reach out, someone will be on the other side to help and take our hand. Faith allows us the courage to inquire. Faith causes us to be curious.

While care and worry provoke stasis and paralysis, faith provokes curiosity, initiative, and the belief in a different future than the situation miring one down at present.

In our scripture for today, we see Jesus encountering a woman from Tyre, a woman who was Greek, Syrophenician by birth. This description is vitally important to the story. After Jesus’ encounter with this woman, the text says, he left Tyre and went through Sidon through the region of the Ten Cities. There he healed a deaf and mute man.

Why are these descriptions so important? None of these areas are Jewish. Jesus has deliberately entered into pagan territory. These areas are not on his way home. He has consciously made a decision to encounter people who are not Jewish and heal people who are not members of the Jewish community. Not only that, they don't subscribe to the same faith. Greeks were polytheistic. They worshipped multiple gods. So did those of Syrophenicia and other pagan territories to the north.

When Jesus commends the woman for her answer, he is giving her a test. She has come to him begging for him to heal her daughter. She has not gone to her own gods or her own temples. She has come to him. That is the kind of faith and curiosity that gives her the courage to approach Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, who she has heard of but not seen until now, and to ask him to heal her daughter.

Likewise, when Jesus enters into the Decapolis (the region of the Ten Cities), some people (again who were not Jewish) had the curiosity and the faith to bring their neighbor to Jesus and beg that he heal him. Again, Jesus heals him.

And the people are amazed.

They could have continued to fret and worry over their condition. But instead, they decided to take a chance, to go out on a limb, go outside of their own culture and faith, and to put their faith in Jesus, and the God of the Israelites.

Every time you pray, you do the same. You don't pray because you believe that there is no god or that no one is listening. You pray, because you are taking a chance. Maybe it's your last resort. Your last chance. But you are praying, talking to God, because you believe that when you are praying, someone out there is hearing you, and just may respond.

The most faith comes many times from those who are entrenched in pain, in sickness, in worry, or in strife, because they will take the most risks. They will risk anything to get out of that place of sorrow and into a better place, even if it means praying to a God, a Jesus, whom they have never known and never worshipped. There's always a first time. This is true evangelism.

Evangelism is not something you make a strategy for. It's not a complicated marketing scheme. It's not a door to door sales pitch. It's not simply a command you are supposed to obey.

Evangelism, true evangelism, is what Jesus shows us in the scriptures: it's healing.

The greatest examples of conversion, proclamation, recognition, and loyalty to Jesus in the scriptures all come from his taking the time to heal people.

And notice this. Jesus doesn't first ask them what religion they ascribe to. He doesn't make them become baptized first. He doesn't make them come to synagogue with him. He doesn't even talk to them about religion. He recognizes their pain, their desperation, and he recognizes that their approach of him, their curiosity and their faith and trust of

him, their courage to come to him, despite their culture and their position in life, are in a sense, their prayers.

We are called not to minister to people like us, the people who already know Jesus. We are called to minister to the people who are not like us, who don't know Jesus, who are suffering and don't know where to turn. We are called to re-claim that proverb, "Care killed the cat," and to stop worrying about who will come into our doors or how to fill our pews.

When we start trusting Jesus, and healing in His name, the people will celebrate. And the people will come.

Healthy people are trusting people. A healthy church is a church in which faith comes first.

Faith, deep faith, the kind of uncontainable faith that comes from healing, joy, and assurance of Jesus' presence, will drive you forward, make you curious, allay your fears, and give you the strength to give others hope.

Increase your faith. Take risks. Stop worrying about the state of the church and start to heal God's people. Be courageous in your faith. And joyful in your mission. For you ARE able. And "care killed the cat."

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III

Fr. Tommy Lane

How are we to understand the healing of bodily ailments prophesied in the first reading? (Isa 35:4-7) Is this prophecy unfulfilled? A Jewish document, the Babylonian Talmud compiled around 5th or 6th century, views the healing of bodily ailments in the first reading today from Isaiah in an eschatological sense (b. Sanh. 11:1, l.22). It sees these healings taking place at the end of time after the general resurrection of the dead. We also believe we will have a glorified body at the resurrection of the dead. However there is another view, that of Mark's Gospel which we heard today. (Mark 7:31-37) What Jesus did to the deaf mute was dramatic; he put his fingers into the deaf man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle. He said, "Ephphatha" which Mark translates for us, "Be opened." Mark has given us the very word in Aramaic used by Jesus as he healed this man. After Jesus healed the deaf and dumb man there is a statement by the crowd which is a deliberate reference to Isaiah's text; they said, "He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." (Mark 7:37) Without stating it explicitly, Mark is saying as clearly as he can that the prophecy of Isaiah is now fulfilled in Christ. Because of Christ we no longer have to wait until the end of time for the prophecy of the first reading to be fulfilled eschatologically. It has already been fulfilled in Christ.

The Jews at the time of Christ, and for centuries before, placed emphasis on the Law and they often simply used the word "Law/Torah" to refer to the entire Old Testament. The early Christians saw the Prophets in a new way, anticipating Christ and used the word "Prophets" as a way of referring to the entire Old Testament in much the same way as the Jews used the word Law to refer to the entire Old Testament. For the early Christians, the oracles of the Prophets were not just for the Prophets' times, not just eschatological, but also about Christ and the Christians' time, and therefore also about our time.

Is Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled only in the healing of that deaf mute? Isaiah's prophecy was also fulfilled in every one of us when we were baptized. Immediately after we were baptized there were [four signs or explanatory rites](#) showing the new life received during baptism. The last of the four signs or explanatory rites is the Ephphatha blessing of the ears and mouth by the priest. It is the action that Jesus performed on the deaf mute, blessing his ears and tongue. This is the prayer of the priest,

The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.

So when we were baptized what Christ did to that deaf mute happened to us in a spiritual way, and Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in us. When we were baptized Christ spiritually put his fingers into our ears and touched our tongue with his spittle. Through faith in Christ our life is raised to a new level. In heaven we shall see God face to face but now we get a foretaste of the beatific vision. In this life we have crosses, but Christ has raised our life to a new level. Because of our faith in Christ nothing is ever again the same. We hear everything through the open ears of faith and say everything through open mouth of witnessing Christ.

Not just that passage from Isaiah but much of the Old Testament is now raised to a new level in Christ. It is precisely because of the raising of the Old Testament to a new level that we are gathered here in prayer this morning. There were many sacrifices in the

temple every day, among them the thanksgiving offering. Rabbinic teaching (Leviticus Rabba 9:7) said that all sacrificing would cease except the todah, the thanksgiving offering. All sacrificing did cease with the destruction of Jerusalem and now there is one daily sacrifice, the Eucharist, the thanksgiving sacrifice, todah. (See Cardinal

Ratzinger's [The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy](#) pp61-60)

The Ephphatha or opening to Christ at baptism is just the first of many openings to Christ all during our life. At that first opening it was Christ who opened our ears and mouth. Since then it is up to us to open up to Christ. How many times Christ stands before us in varied ways and we have to decide to open up to Christ. He will not push his way in. The handle is on the inside of the door for us to open. Those who open the door more to Christ may be those whom society often rejects. The second reading today, the Letter of James, warns against making class distinctions. In the Scriptures the poor are seen as much more willing to open the door to Christ.

Through faith in Christ our life is raised to a new level. In heaven we shall see God face to face but now we get a foretaste of the beatific vision. In this life we have crosses, but Christ has raised our life to a new level. Christ stands before each of us today, to once again bless our ears that we may hear what he says to us in ever new ways, and to bless our tongues that we may witness to him:

Ephphatha. The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.