

THAT'S WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR

The story's told that at a celebrity party, singer Stevie Wonder met golf champ, Tiger Woods. Wonder mentioned that he, too, is an excellent golfer. Tiger was a bit skeptical that the blind musician could play golf well, but he was too polite to say anything. Wonder explained, "When I tee off I have a guy call to me from the green. My sharp sense of hearing lets me aim." Tiger was impressed and Stevie suggested that they play a round. When Tiger agreed, Stevie asks, "How about we play for \$100,000?" Tiger insisted he wouldn't play for money, but Stevie argued until Tiger finally relented and said, "So, when do you want to play?" Stevie laughed and replied, "I'll play any night you choose."

We know that there are many people with handicapping conditions like Stevie Wonder, who make their mark in the world. Their determination to succeed serves to inspire us all. Our story today is about a man who had a handicapping condition. Jesus and his disciples were in the region of the Decapolis. Some people brought a man who could not hear and could hardly talk. These people begged Jesus to place his hand on the man. The fact that the man was able to talk even with difficulty indicates that he probably was not born deaf. If he had been born deaf, he probably wouldn't have any speech abilities at all. But his garbled speech indicates he had once been able to speak and had lost the ability because of his deafness. Regardless of the source of his disability, like many people with speech impediments, he probably suffered a great deal of ridicule.

Jesus had special compassion for people with handicapping conditions. That's quite obvious in the New Testament. The blind, the lame, the hearing impaired—all found that they had a friend in Jesus. Think how long it has taken for our society to catch up with Jesus'

compassion. Only within recent years has there been a commitment on the part of society to provide access for the handicapped. Rather than complaining about unused handicapped space in parking lots, we ought to thank God that our society is finally recognizing the special needs of this segment of our population. Let's turn for a few moments to the story of this man with the hearing and speech impediments.

In spite of this man's handicaps he had a couple of important things going for him. **FOR ONE THING, HE HAD PEOPLE WHO CARED ABOUT HIM.** Notice he had friends who brought him to Jesus. It makes a difference when you are struggling to cope with a disability when you have people who care and are willing to help. In Brooklyn, New York, there is a school named Chush that caters to learning disabled children. At a Chush fund-raising dinner, the father of a student delivered a speech that would never be forgotten by all who attended.

"Where is the perfection in my son Shaya?" He asked, "Everything God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God's perfection?" At first the audience was shocked by the father's question. "I believe," the father answered, "that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that he seeks is in the way people react to this child." And then the father told this story: one day he and his son, Shaya, were walking through the park when they saw a group of boys playing baseball. Shaya wanted very much to join them, but his father hesitated. Would the other boys let Shaya play, or would they laugh at him and reject him? Surprisingly, the other boys allowed him to play. But it was obvious that Shaya had no athletic skills, and so he stayed on the bench most of the time.

In the ninth inning, the two teams were tied, and Shaya's team had men on base. To everyone's surprise, the captain of the team allowed Shaya to bat. The pitcher, seeing Shaya's nervousness, stepped forward a few feet and pitched the ball softly at Shaya. He swung and missed it. One of Shaya's teammates stepped up behind him and placed his hands over Shaya's. Together they hit the next ball. It rolled to the feet of the pitcher, but the pitcher seemed not to notice it at first. "Run to first, Shaya! Run to first!" the father called and little Shaya ran with all his might to first base. The pitcher finally picked up the ball and threw it over the head of the first baseman. "Run to second, Shaya! Run to second!" By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman who would tag out Shaya, who was still running. But the right fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions were, so he threw the ball high and far over the second baseman's head. Now the whole team was screaming, "Run to third, Shaya! Run to third!" Shaya made it to third just in time to see the second baseman throw the ball way over the third baseman's head. Now everyone on the field was shouting as one, "Run home, Shaya! Run home!" And little Shaya made it to home plate, where his team lifted him onto their shoulders and carried him around like a conquering hero. "That day," said the father softly, with tears now rolling down his cheeks, "those 18 boys reached their level of God's perfection."

When you are struggling with a disability of any kind, it makes a difference that you are surrounded by caring people. God's perfection is found in people who care. But there is something else in the story of the hearing-impaired man we need to see; HE HAD FRIENDS WHO CARED ABOUT HIS SPIRITUAL NEEDS.

Of course, they were interested in his physical needs, but that is not necessarily why they brought him to Jesus. Notice that the man's friends didn't ask Jesus to heal him; they asked only

that Jesus put his hand on him and bless him. They knew that Jesus was a holy man of God. They felt their friend would be blessed just by being in Jesus' presence. These friends were concerned not only with the man's physical well-being. They were concerned with the man's spiritual needs.

You and I make this mistake far too often. If we see a family without food, we will rush off to the Supermarket and buy them a shopping cart full of groceries. If we hear about someone who is about to be thrown out of their home, we will take up an offering to help them pay their rent. But more of our friends have spiritual problems than physical ones, and somehow it is more difficult for us to intervene over spiritual concerns than if their problem was physical. Sometimes a simple invitation to go with you to a Bible study, or Men's fellowship or a worship service can be the greatest favor you can do for them. But some of us have never ever issued that kind of invitation to a friend.

Oh, I know, some of it is due to simple timidity. Some of us are too intimidated to speak to others about personal matters. I was reading about a young man who was studying to be a monk and, like many people, he was scared to death to do any public speaking. He went to the headmaster and said, "I will do anything you want me to do, but don't ask me to preach. I'll scrub floors, I'll work out in the fields, I'll do anything, but don't ask me to preach." The wise headmaster knew the very thing this man needed to do was to conquer his fears, so he said, "Tomorrow you are preaching in chapel."

The young man got up before his peers. He was nervous, his mind went blank, and he said, "Do you know what I'm going to say?" They all shook their heads in the negative. He said, "Neither do I. Let's stand for the benediction." Naturally the headmaster was upset. He

approached the young man and said, "I'm going to give you a second chance. Tomorrow you are preaching again, but no more tricks." The next day the nervous young man again got up to speak. He said, "Brothers, do you know what I'm going to say?" This time they all nodded their heads yes. He said, "Since you already know, let's stand up and have the benediction." Again, the headmaster was upset with him, but he gave him one more chance. He told him to quit pulling those tricks. So the young man got up the next day and said, "Brothers, do you know what I'm going to say?" Half the heads shook yes, and half the heads shook no. He said, "Let those who know, tell those who don't. Let's stand for the benediction."

Any of you who dread speaking in public can relate to this young monk's fears. Some of you may even be more terrified to talk one-on-one with someone about their faith. Isn't it sad, though, that our Lord really only gave us one critical commandment—that we reach out to our neighbor and help that neighbor with his or her spiritual needs—and that is the one thing that many of us have never done. This man who had lost his hearing and had a speech impediment had friends who cared about his spiritual life. Thus they brought him to the one person who could help him. They brought him to Jesus. How fortunate he was. Jesus can heal, he can help, and he can deliver. Millions of people through the centuries have discovered that no one can transform us like Christ.

There is a scene in the movie BEN-HUR. BEN-HUR is by a well, and he is filthy, stooped in the dirt, and overcome with a fierce thirst. The camera focuses on Ben-Hur's face. His countenance is twisted in misery. Then the shadow of a man crosses his visage. We do not see the man. The camera remains fixed on Ben-Hur's face. The man offers Ben-Hur water. As Ben-Hur lifts his wretched face to behold the merciful stranger, we see a sudden radiance transform his face. We know instantly that when he lifts his head he looks directly into the face

of Christ. What a difference it makes when someone is in the presence of Jesus. When someone is in the presence of Jesus he may not regain his physical hearing, but still he hears things he's never heard before—words of assurance and love and hope. He may not regain his physical vision, but he sees things he's never seen before—inwardly he sees the face of God.

Is there someone you know that needs to inwardly see Jesus? Is there someone you know who needs to hear those words of assurance, hope and love? Everyone needs somebody who cares about their spiritual needs. Everyone needs someone who will bring them to the One who can really make their life worth living—Jesus Christ.