Spit and Ceremony – Just Jesus Stories

1. We've spent two Sundays looking at some of Jesus's hard – some might say harsh – sayings. This week, I want to look at some of his miracles where something is strange. It is rather like that old Sesame Street song, "One of these things is not like the other."

2. Let's start in Mark 7:33. There, Jesus spat and touched the man's tongue. Wait. What? We've seen Jesus heal at a distance. We've seen him heal when someone touched his clothes. We've seen him heal up close and personal – sometimes with a touch, sometimes with a word…but…spit and tongue touching? What is going on here?

3. These are unicorns…or, at least, odd flowers in the garden. When something out of the norm occurs, it is wise to stop and look at what is there and what isn't there until we get a grasp on what is really going on.

4. This event takes place just after Jesus had that awkward exchange with the Syro-Phoenician woman. Let's remember the flow of Jesus's life that gets us here: the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist, the feeding of the 5000, walking on water, the confrontation with the Pharisees about what is clean and what is unclean, and then the Syro-Phoenician woman.

5. Mark 7:31ff begins immediately after the Syro-Phoenician woman goes home and finds that Jesus has granted her request and the demon had already left her daughter. Then… Jesus leaves Tyre and enters the Decapolis.

6. Some people bring a man to Jesus. This one did not come on his own, though he could have; he could see. The story says "he could hardly talk" which would indicate that his deafness was profound but he wasn't, technically, mute. He might have had a serious disorder of his tongue and vocal chords, but he could make noises.

7. Why did Jesus touch his ears and why did he spit?

8. In the next chapter, another strange incident. Mark 8:22-25. Once again, Jesus spits but, this time, he is putting his hands on the blind

man's eyes. Hmmm. We can tell that this man wasn't blind from birth because he knew what trees looked like but we still don't know why Jesus used spit and touch to heal when he didn't have to do that.

9. The last incident like this is John 9. We are going to look at that chapter in more detail next week. For now, we want to focus just on the healing…even though the rest of that chapter is stunning. John 9:1-7.

10. Again, we will look at the rest of the lessons in that chapter next week. Notice the difference here? Jesus applied the mud on this man's eyes and then sent him away. The man did not know he was healed until Jesus was gone!

11. So…what's going on? Each case is slightly different. He touches different places, he gives different instructions, and the response is immediate, delayed, and gradual – differing in each case.

12. What IS consistent? Spit and ceremony. Some have reasoned that Jesus's use of saliva was due to the beliefs of his culture. Roman and Jewish physicians considered spit to be a valid treatment for blindness but the reasons behind that are hard to discern. There is no question that the dryness of the climate and the power of the sun would have been very damaging to the eyes of people in that age.

13. Some balms and ointments were available but they were costly and not always easy to find. They could spoil and cause damage as well. Saliva might have been used the same way we use eye drops today – to moisten dry eyes.

14. This explanation doesn't do much for me. If these men were doubting and skittish, maybe Jesus's spitting made sense to them and helped them allow Jesus to touch and engage them. That is certainly possible.

15. Some commentators have suggested that, especially in John 9, Jesus is hearkening back to creation. Jesus made us from the dust of the earth so he is using mud here as a symbol. I don't buy that one at all. It seems unnecessarily theological and metaphorical.

16. What I see here is a complex convergence of things that amaze me and make me like Jesus even more. He found a way to approach each person that would not make them frightened. He didn't toss off a healing like an emperor would toss coins or candy into a crowd; he engaged. He was literally hands-on when he saw that that was best for that person.

17. He also didn't shock the system by healing them immediately. Believe it or not, it is best to regain sight slowly. Some who've been blind from birth who are then given the ability to see via transplants say that, if they are in a hurry, they close their eyes as they go through the house. Those who've had hearing restored or for the first time report how long and difficult it is to get used to the cochlear implants or other devices, how hard it is to adjust them.

18. It takes time to understand what has happened to you and that your life now is different. We get that, so we build ceremony into our lives. We have birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, funerals and special times of transition such as quinceanera or 50th anniversaries. Graduations are a big deal to most. All of them are transition times and ceremonies help people deal with the transitions.

19. I've never been interested in ceremonies and procedures but I HAVE developed habits and patterns of behavior that really function as ceremonies. The way we spend our evenings at home, the way I write my lessons, my movement from Sunday evening to Monday morning…

20. God knows we need ceremonies. Yes, Jesus could have healed without a word, without even looking at the person and God could have done the same with the world. Instead, He gave us the tabernacle, the commandments, rules about clothing and life…and then He gave us baptism, the Lord's Supper, the gathering, and songs.

21. We need the ceremonies to help us with our transitions. They remind us who we are and where we are in our life. They remind us of connections and disconnections. These men needed a ceremony. They needed something more than a quick healing. And Jesus accommodated them. You have to like a Savior like that.