

# Speaking Christianese

Mark 7:31-37

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on September 5, 2021

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For Father's Day Anna bought me a book to read to Laurence called *Dada*. Every page on the book shows the same scene, only with a rotating cast of farm animals. The scene is this: there is a dad-animal on one side and their baby calf, foal, piglet, etc, on the other; and every dad is enthusiastically saying the word "Dada!" to their baby, while the baby in every instance confusedly or blankly responds with the only word they know how to say: "Moooo," or "Neigh" or "Oink" respectively. Laurie finds this book to be hilarious.

This book about the foolish attempt of many fathers to "win" the race to their child's first word is also, at a deeper level, a book about how language functions. That is, we know that the sounds and words that come out of a child's mouth are largely determined by the sounds and words that first enter through their ears. Their outputs are determined by the inputs.

We know this is true not just by looking at children, but also by looking at many people who are deaf, like the gentleman we read about in Mark chapter 7. He was unable to hear and thereby also struggled with an impediment in his speech. On the one hand, it is easy to read this story as another straightforward episode of Jesus healing someone in need, which of course it is. But on the other hand, especially given this story's placement immediately following the episode with the Syrophenician woman, and generally given what we know about Mark's style of writing, I think we can also read this story as communicating a deeper, symbolic lesson as well—one I think has to do with language and what language has to do with being a Christian.

Something I'm afraid we falsely assume is that this process of language-learning stops at some point; that once we learn English we know how to speak English and the way we speak never changes. But the truth is, this process never stops. Our speech is always and constantly changing and evolving. And our inputs are still largely determining our outputs—but for us it's just at happening at levels of greater subtlety and complexity than when we were first learning to speak.

Have you ever, for example, started spending lots of time with someone new, be it a new friend or coworker, and then several weeks later realized that you have subconsciously adopted some of that person's catch phrases? Have you ever had your teenager return from summer camp with all manner of new vocabulary words you hadn't heard before? Those are simple examples.

But it happens for us on a much more complicated level as well. It's not just a matter of isolated words and phrases you might subconsciously adopt from a new friend. If you hang out with that new friend long enough, and especially if you stop hanging out with everyone else you used to see, brick by brick, word by word, you'll find that ever-so-subtly aspects of your entire worldview will begin to change.

This phenomenon, I think, goes a long way in explaining the paralysis of the hopelessly and incurably partisan dialogue in our country. Those on the right and left don't just substantively disagree on the issues anymore, they

speak entirely different languages. And even though occasionally they use the same or similar words, those words mean different things within the ecosystems of their respective tribes, such that all of us now struggle to even speak intelligently to those we disagree with anymore. We're speaking different languages and living in different realities. It's why it feels like every politician is talking past one another. We participate and reinforce the problems by watching and listening to different news sources, by scrolling through our social media feeds which are algorithmically pre-determined to show us content that will only reinforce what we already believe, and we're left without the ability to empathize with anyone who plays for "the other team." Mother Mary gave a great sermon last week about how differently the word "liberty" can be used. But there's plenty of other examples. Like freedom or rights or responsibility or socialism or even the word politics itself.

The place it sounds like I'm about to go is to say something like, "and this is why we all need to be careful about and diversify our inputs. You should read multiple news outlets. You should go the extra mile to get to know people who are different from you. Everyone should delete all their social media accounts, especially Twitter, entirely. Blah blah blah. And maybe probably we should all do those things.

But I want to come at the problem from a different angle, because none of that has that much to do with God or church or what we're doing right now. What this conversation has to do with us and church and being a Christian is this: I actually think that being a disciple of Jesus is very much like learning a new language. Because being a Christian in the beginning is first about learning lots of new vocabulary words. Like forgiveness. Like sin. Like salvation. Like Holy Spirit, trinity, disciple, grace, baptism, eucharist. And on and on.

But eventually it becomes about more than individual words and phrases. When enough of those words and phrases come together, when you can begin to string them together into sentences you start to see the world a bit differently. Learning to describe the world around you with Christian language opens up new possibilities for how you can act in the world. Mistakes, for example, are no longer things you're just punished for or alienated for, they are sins you can confess and be forgiven for and then restored to reconciled healed relationship. Death is no longer the end; it is a gateway to everlasting life.

Let me give you two more examples.

Take the word nature, for example. A mentor of mine some years ago challenged me to remove the word nature from my vocabulary completely. Christians have no need of it, he said. His point was, the Christian word is creation.

There's no instance where you could use the word nature where creation doesn't work better. It's a subtle difference, but notice how the word nature is more neutral, more standing-on-its-own-independence, whereas creation implies an intentional design, some enchantment even. Think about how erasing the word nature from your vocabulary and using the word creation instead might better motivate you to care the earth, to recognize it not as a random accident of the collision of molecules, but as a precious and intentional gift for you to enjoy.

Another example: The Psalms. The Psalms are an encyclopedia of human emotion. They are filled with anything and everything one can feel—praise, thanksgiving, lament, grief, rage, revenge. And in reading them

over and over again, reading them as prayers, we learn over time what we can do with all those wide-ranging emotions that we sometimes feel and don't know what to do with. The Psalms teach us that there is nothing we need to hide back from God. Nothing we need to be too embarrassed to show him. But that anything and everything inside us can be offered up to God and transformed in that space.

Learning to speak Christianese does not mean you forget how to speak English. Or you forget how to make your way around in this world. But it's a bit like living in one reality nested inside of another. The more Christianese becomes your primary language, the more you find that you have to constantly translate in your head when interacting with the world around you.

Coming to church once a week is a bit like going to French class once a week. It's a good enough method of learning French. But it's going to be much more effective, and go much faster, if you do your homework along the way. Homework in this case is those things you promise—or your parents promised on your behalf—when you were baptized: proclaiming the Gospel by word and example, loving your neighbor as yourself, striving for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. It's more than that too: it's reading your Bible, spending time with God in solitude and in prayer. Before you know it, it's not just French class, you're living in Paris. And who doesn't want to live in Paris.

The truth is Christianese is the most beautiful language to speak because the kingdom of God is the most beautiful place to live. It is not necessarily the easiest place to live. It is not immune to tragedy and brokenness. But it is a language that sees and describes reality clearly—as it really is, as God sees it. It is the language our souls were destined to speak, they are words that make sense of our existence.

In closing, it should be said that learning a new language is not a mountaintop experience. It is a matter of cultivating mundane, daily habits through which you can only see change occur slowly over a long period of time. But as I have said in at least a hundred sermons here by now—that's one of the keys to following Jesus. Notice the bizarre, mundane details through which Jesus cures the deaf man in our story. He puts his fingers in his ears and spits before putting those same fingers on his tongue. Why does Jesus insist on healing the deaf man in this way when he could have just snapped his fingers?

Part of what it means for Jesus to be fully human and fully divine is that he does divine things humanly and human things divinely. Jesus is doing this divine healing humanly. And if we want to speak the divine language of the kingdom of God, God will help us humanly too. It really is a matter of allowing Jesus into the nooks and crannies of our daily rhythms. Like a friend whose words and phrases you subconsciously adopt over time. And who over more time begins to change your entire life from the inside out so that slowly and slowly you begin to look like one another.

What I'm saying is, if you're feeling like you don't have the language to make sense of the world around you right now, it may not be a matter of finding the right new outlet. It may be about learning to speak a new language entirely. Amen.

