

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**  
**September 10, 2006**

**Beyond Words**  
Mark 7:36

Words have power. Words can build up and tear down. They can bless and they can curse. But some experiences lead us into a realm that is beyond words. For many of us the events of September 11, 2001 fall into that category. The inadequacy of words to bring meaning to this tragedy has led us to lean heavily on photographic images of 9/11. Gripping images have the power to multiply the impact of words many times over. Yet even the most profound images fall short in the face of an event like this.

Garrison Keillor recently reviewed a book about the photographic images of 9/11. He writes: The mainstream media seized upon inspirational and patriotic images...thus began a sort of mythification of the day into which politicians entered, bearing spears and shields. Photography assisted in that. Photography couldn't convey the failure of national defense and intelligence, or the failure of the city of New York, even after the 1993 bombing of the trade center, to coordinate police and fire communications, a failure that cost many lives that morning, or certain tragic choices in the design of the towers. You need prose reporting for that. And in the end the images become common and one turns to words to find the reality ("Bearing Witness, *New York Times Book Review*, September 3, 2006, page 10).

In the face of the tragedy of 9/11 neither words nor images are enough.

In the seventh chapter of the Gospel of Mark Jesus speaks of situations where neither words nor images are sufficient. Here Jesus is confronted by a man who is not able to deal in words. The man has been deaf from birth and suffers from a serious speech impediment. The man's friends beg Jesus to heal him of this disorder. Jesus responds by removing the man from the crowd and taking him to a private place. Then Jesus offers the words which have the power to redeem. He says, "Be opened," and the man was healed. The man's ears are opened and his tongue is released. For the first time in his life he is able to hear and speak clearly.

As the news of what Jesus has done begins to reverberate through the crowd, Jesus makes an unusual request. He instructs those who have witnessed this healing to be silent. Neither words nor images are to be used to give meaning to this special moment. The followers of Jesus have to be wondering why he would call for silence. This is a wonderful public relations opportunity. The more people talk the larger the crowds will be. Larger crowds mean greater impact for Jesus' ministry. It will force the leaders of that society to take Jesus seriously. But Jesus is not interested in public relations opportunities. He wants his followers to look beyond the words and images which can be so easily manipulated. He wants them to look for the truth that can only be found in the silence. There are no words or images which can adequately describe what happened between Jesus and the man who could not hear or speak. What happened was an expression of God's presence in the midst of human brokenness. It was a sign of grace.

We should not be surprised that neither words nor images can convey the significance of 9/11. Our best response may be to make our peace with the silence. John Labriola is a survivor of that tragic event. He was one of the lucky ones who made it down the stairwell before the first tower collapsed. It is not the words or the images which define his experience of that day. What he remembers is not what people said but what they did. He writes:

The one conclusion I came to on 9/11 is that the people in the stairwell...really were in "a state of grace." They helped each other...Most people are basically good. I know this, with certainty, because I have gone through the crucible (Garrison Keillor, "Bearing Witness," *New York Times Book Review*, September 3, 2006, page 10.) That is the truth that comes to us in the silence. Beyond the words there is grace.