

Sermon: PENTECOST 15 September 6th, 2015

In the Name...

A fellow was having trouble with his hearing aids, so, he went to a specialist who gave him the latest model and they worked perfectly. When he went back for his six-month check-up the doctor said, "I'll bet your family is glad you can hear so well." "Oh," the man replied, "I haven't told them, yet, but, after hearing them talk about me I've changed my will three times."

In our Gospel reading this morning, we are presented with Jesus healing two residents of what today we call Lebanon. The first; a woman whose daughter is possessed, and the second; a man who has lost his speech and hearing. In one case a spiritual cure, in the other a physical.

In arranging their material, the Gospel writers used the miracles of Jesus to demonstrate the power of God and, thus, inspire people to believe in him. But, the miracle stories are also meant to inspire the people hearing them to discover a new way of looking at the world. For example, today's stories are used by Mark to teach that God not only heals the sick, but, that God also heals in the Gentile world. The Great Physician is also The Great Reconciler.

Time, geography, and culture, have eroded the impact of these stories on us. However, they had a profound effect on their first audience. For a good Jew to hear that a prophet of God had done miracles for Arabs would have been mind-boggling.

The animosity felt between Jews and Gentiles in the days of our Lord was as intense as the hatred between Bosnians and Serbs in our own day. There was no middle ground. There were no equal opportunity laws or diversity training classes. Bigotry was a way of life and everybody lived it. It was the normal attitude to people of other ethnic and racial ancestry. That is why reports of Jesus' ministry shocked the ancient world. These were more than just healings. These were proclamations. The power, love and mercy of God is offered to every person regardless of nationality.

You and I take this for granted, but 2,000 years ago this was insane. In the book of Acts, the Christians are accused of "turning the world upside down" precisely because they were defying conventions. The rich and poor ate together. Jew and Gentile held hands and prayed for one another. The master and the slave called each other "brother." The Church of the 1st Century was breaking down the walls that divided and separated people of all sorts and conditions from one another and from the God who was Father of them all.

But, it was not all a procession of triumph. The church was persecuted, not least for this radical aspect of the faith. And the pressure was on the Christians to conform to the ways of the world. Oh, by all means, believe in the life of a world to come, but, don't do anything in this world that nobody else does. That's why St. James had to write his letter, as we heard today, warning Christians against going along with class distinctions. And the struggle goes on in our own day.

Back where I used to live, in Dunkirk, New York, there had been five Roman Catholic churches, but, one of them closed in the 1970's. It was Sacred Heart and had been founded a hundred years

before by German families. The plan was to merge it with the nearby St. Mary's, which had been founded a hundred years before by Irish families. There was no way, however, that the German-descended Sacred Heart people were going to go to the "Irish" church and there was some feeling at St. Mary's against accepting them if they did. We may have heard of similar situations.

Well, to resolve the problem, the diocese, quite cleverly, decided to also close St. Mary's, on paper, and rededicate the building in honour of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton - the first American-born saint. And that worked. It made everything o.k. because it wasn't the "Irish" church anymore. It was something completely new - an "American" church. Of course, forty years later, there's a new issue with the influx of Hispanics going to the "American" church, but, that just goes to show how hard it is to break free of the world.

That's why the story of the deaf man in today's gospel is a good lesson for Christians who are in that position. They can't hear all the words of Jesus because the voices of society are deafening. And, because they have become deaf to the words of Jesus, they have a speech impediment in speaking about him.

We read that Jesus took the man aside in private, put his fingers into his ears, touched his tongue, and only then the man's ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Now, why did Jesus have to go into such an elaborate process when he could simply have said a word or waved his hand and the man would have been all right? Because, by taking the man far from the madding crowd, Jesus is saying that in order to be healed of deafness to the Word of God those who would follow him need to distance themselves from the masses around them. And, by touching him, Jesus is also saying that realizing the ways God has touched us in our lives is essential to being able to speak about him.

And the result is that not only the man, but, the entire community experiences such joy that they can't keep it to themselves. They proclaim it. And the lesson for us is that once we've been healed of the deafening din of the world, and felt the hand of God upon us, there should be nothing to stop us from proclaiming Jesus as we should.

The Gospel is supposed to be, as the Early Christians knew, a society-changing message. The noise of the world, however, has caused many Christians to reduce the faith to something intensely private. We so often hear people speak of having a personal relationship with Jesus. And we should. He is our personal Saviour. But, that's only the beginning. Jesus also came to save the World. To use another image, without a crossbar the Cross is just a pole.

Do we realize, then, how we may have been deafened? Does it occur to us that we may have developed a speech impediment? This Scripture challenges us to consider how we might. The Good News is that it also shows us how to be healed.

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