

Proper 18 – Series B

It is an old saw that actions speak louder than words. After two weeks of listening to Jesus tell the Pharisees that their hearts are in the wrong place and then telling the disciples that their hearts are filled with all sorts of dark and nasty things, we see Jesus do something about it in today's readings. His actions speak louder than his words. The words of Jesus have condemned, surfacing the problem which lies in the heart, the actions of Jesus save people from the problem of their very being. Read in isolation from the prior weeks' readings, the full impact of Jesus' actions is diminished. But in the context of what he said, they become significant. He has spoken the Law, he has done the Gospel.

Jesus draws out of the Syrophenician woman her astounding confession of faith. Here is a woman as far from clean as you can get, a spiritual descendent of Jezebel in the Old Testament and the mother of a demoniac. Not only has she come from the wrong people, she has fulfilled every stereotype. Then he will open a man's ears and loose his tongue so that he can speak the praise of Jesus and God that are indicative of another sort of heart than the one Jesus speaks of earlier in the chapter. This is the tongue loosed to praise God because Jesus has opened the ears to hear. God puts something other inside the man's heart.

The readings today focus our attention on our life as a product of God's activity. Jesus has said that there are all sorts of nasty stuff inside us. What he will do today is put something different inside of people. Literally he will open their ears and loosen their tongues so they may speak something other than the spite, hate, lies, and other sin that normally would be inside those hearts.

Isaiah proclaims to a very troubled and fearful people. He looks forward to God putting courage and good cheer in those hearts. God will cause the mute tongues to sing for joy and the lame will leap like a deer and the deaf shall hear.

The point which we need to hear is that this is all from God. It will be the collect of the day that addresses the current generational issue. It prays for God to give us a renewed will so that even what we pray for is in accord with God's intent. Any talk about sanctification, any talk about the Christian life really needs to start with the reality that this is a new creation in Christ. The old has gone, the new has come, and this is God's doing not mine. The bible is not given to us as a self-help guide, a pathway to rectitude, or the owner's manual of life as if we could somehow fix our own problems. It is always a love letter from God to a rebellious creation whom he still loves despite our sin.

The current generation tends to locate the goodness of man in the will. "I am sorry I hurt you, but I did not mean to..." is somehow supposed to remove the guilt from the person who has done it. At least my heart was in the right place. But does that really take away the hurt? No, it probably doesn't. If you know anyone who is part of the Four Square movement or the Church of God movement, or one of the other holiness bodies, you might have heard them talk this way. The doctrine of entire sanctification is not the idea that we are sinless, but it is the idea that our will

has been perfected in Christ and we no longer want to sin. We may mistakenly sin still, but that was never our intent. This is a potent narrative that has wormed its way into the casual and unreflective theology of many people.

Of course, we know that this doctrine has some serious flaws. My Four Square neighbor is a wonderful woman, but because she has enjoyed a few sins along the way, she has doubted that her prior conversion experiences were valid. She wanted to sin, and a real Christian does not want to sin. So she must not have been a real Christians, so she was baptized again, and again, and again! The Lutheran in me shudders to think that God's gracious and loving act in baptism could be so misunderstood and not an occasion for comfort but for fear that we were somehow not good enough. Of course we were not good enough, that is why God did it!

But God does affect the Christian will and the Christian life. James in the series of readings we begin today from his little missive will insist on it. God's love is not pre-conditional but it is post-conditional. The Christian cannot encounter God in faith and be unchanged. Being the same old sinner whom God raised up from that muck is just not really an option for us.

The preacher must strike this balance, and many before have fallen off one side or the other on this. God is the source of all that is good, and yet, the good which God has done involves the transformation of the human being into someone who sings "Praise the Lord" with the psalmist today because God reigns. Is it the psalmist or God who sings those words? The answer is "yes!"

Collect of the Day

O Lord, let Your merciful ears be open to the prayers of Your humble servants and grant that what they ask may be in accord with Your gracious will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This is a really interesting prayer in that if God answers it, he listens and he changes the prayers which we offer up to him. This is a prayer for right prayers. That is a pretty tight little circle we are petitioning for there.

We pray a great deal in church, or at least we should. But I wonder about those prayers sometimes. Do we pray for healing as if healing is the end of the story? We often pray "Open your ears to your humble servants and grant what they ask." But do we pray the rest of this prayer? Do we pray for healing or help as if the real of goal of our lives our comfort instead of the will of God and his Kingdom come?

Perhaps we need to think about how any prayer, if God answered it as we desire, would fit into the kingdom of God. Do we pray for people to be healed, as an example, or do we pray for healing so that the healed may proclaim the goodness of God? Do we pray for success of a ministry because it will relieve us of a worry about the budget or do we pray so that people may be served with the Gospel? I think sometimes our prayers miss something really important which is found in this prayer – that we are not really praying "for" the Church or the individual, we

are praying for God's will to be done, his kingdom to come, his name to be hallowed, etc. Yes, we do pray for daily bread and thus I am not saying that praying for healing is bad, but do we not also need to pray those other petitions of the Lord's Prayer?

When we look specifically at this prayer, it is another one of those prayers from which I think the semi-colon after "will" might be profitably removed. Just try it without that little bit of punctuation in there. Without the semi-colon turning the final element into a conclusion to the prayer, the will of God is through Jesus. That is a different theological emphasis altogether.

God even has merciful ears. That is pretty merciful really, if you think about it. We appeal to the mercy of his ears in asking him even to hear us. A universe that was governed justly would have a default isolation-status for sinful people like us, but that is not what we experience in God. We have a merciful Lord, a God who listens to our profane prayers and never tunes us out, even when we are silent toward him.

That part we probably have down and that is cause to rejoice. But the next part of the petition of this prayer is where things start to get a little dicey. We ask that our prayers start to reflect God more than they do ourselves. We want Him to "grant" that what we ask might be according to his will.

It would seem to me that the rub here is in the "grant." Just how does God give us to be in accord with his will? For my part, I know just how stubborn you can be and, in my more lucid and honest moments, I might even admit that I can be a little stubborn once in a while. It would seem that God should be doing a little more than "granting" here. It would seem that God should be doing some "breaking" or "imposing" or "forcing." A lot of the stubborn folk I know don't get less stubborn if you are compliant with them; it only seems to encourage them. Give them an inch and they might just take the whole mile.

But God gives, he grants us that we might pray according to his will. This is frustrating. Many of us have been shocked by the things we read in the news. Migrants are dying by the scores in the Mediterranean and trucks on European highways. Locally Portland State University was recently suckered into making an announcement about a massive give which proved to be nothing and simply had served to stroke the ego of a charlatan. Every so often we hear of some monster who has kept a child chained in his basement. The world is filled with people whom I am not inclined to "grant" anything except perhaps to grant them a very long prison term.

Does one ever feel like saying: "God, this giving thing isn't working out so well? I think we need to be a little more forceful with the "Thy will be done" bit. Of course, the prayer is designed for the humble of heart and the servant of God, but even that is not necessarily saying much. Remember the BTK killer was an officer in his Lutheran congregation. The fellow of a few years ago who scandalized California, the one who fathered two children with the little girl he kept chained in the back yard for a decade, was increasingly a religious lunatic. He was shouting that God spoke to him through a box and he was finally noticed when he showed up on

Berkeley's campus to hand out religious literature with this two granddaughters by this poor girl. (When the Berkeley police notice that you are odd, that is saying something.)

We need God to answer this prayer more than you might imagine, frustratingly, it hits the mark when it says that this is a matter of "granting" not "forcing." But this is deep into the mystery of salvation and the fact that God wants to preserve for us the free will which he created. He honors that creation far more than we do sometimes. And so, he grants us, he gives us, but he never forces us, he does not "make us do it." He knows the cost; he knows the cost to little girls in California, migrant children who die in trucks on summer roads in Austria or in the holds of rusting hulks in the Mediterranean, and lots of other places around the world. He knows the cost to helpless people everywhere and he still values the ability of men and women to be moral agents, creatures with choices to make. I cannot say I always agree with him, but that is my problem, one which he has pledged to work on- to grant me understanding as well.

Isaiah 35:4-7a The editors of the pericope system have given us the heart of this passage, but it needs to be read in the context of the whole beautiful chapter.

*¹The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;*

*² it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and singing.*

*The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.*

*They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.*

*³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.*

⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart,

"Be strong; fear not!

Behold, your God

*will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.*

He will come and save you."

*⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;*

*⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.*

*For waters break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;*

⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,

and the thirsty ground springs of water;
*in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

⁸ *And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;
the unclean shall not pass over it.*

*It shall belong to those who walk on the way;
even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.*

⁹ *No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.*

¹⁰ *And the ransomed of the LORD shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

This is a great text. It is simply filled with Gospel. After the last two weeks of the Gospel lessons being a little short on good news, this is a welcome relief.

Say to those who have an anxious heart. Isaiah's folks had plenty to be anxious about. The world of David was long gone, and now emperors with strange sounding names were afoot. Tiglath-Pileser and Sennacherib and others would rampage up and down the land of Judah in the days of Isaiah. Weakened by internal rot and cut off from their financial base in the Galilee, the once mighty armies of David had withered to a wholly ineffectual force. They were powerless to stop all this. All they could do was hole up in a few well-fortified cities, but even they all fell to Sennacherib but Jerusalem, and that was saved by an act of God.

You can read the frightening story of Sennacherib's invasion in the very next chapters of Isaiah, 36-37.

Isaiah sees a day when the current order will be stood on its head. Isaiah's audience felt powerless before the super-powers who were fighting for control of Palestine at the time. They had gotten the short end of the stick and God showing up with vengeance would have been welcome because they had a long list of grievances against those occupying powers of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. But this applies not only to the political fortunes of the nation of Israel, but the whole sinful order of things. For the world itself was subjected to bondage says Paul (Romans 8). In the day of deliverance, according to Isaiah, the blind will see and the deaf will hear. The mute shall sing for joy. There will be water in the desert and the dry hills where the jackals hang out will be marshlands filled with reeds and rushes.

This upside down vengeance of God applies not only to the political, but also to the physical. God wreaks his vengeance on the blindness, deafness, and physical deformities which keep his people from walking. God declares war on cancer and ALS and MS and the list of afflictions which weigh his people down and mercilessly oppress us. Of course that runs to the spiritual and emotional as well. The Demons also flee at Jesus word and the darkneses of mental illness and depression are dispersed in his light.

This is much more than universal healthcare coverage. This might even exceed the goals of compassionate conservatism, a thousand points of light, a Great Society, and the New Deal all put together. When the collect above asks God that we might pray according to his will, is this what it means? Is it that our prayers for Aunt Matilda's cancer and grandpa Jack's heart disease are simply too small. We would be happy to if they could just be the little old people who live out their days with a touch of arthritis and a bum knee, weakened by age and with minds filled with memories they would sometimes rather forget. God has something much grander in mind for them than the arresting of a single process in their body which will finally kill them. He has a whole new creation in mind, a body which does not fail, a mind which is healthy, and a spirit which rejoices in God as Savior every moment.

Are our prayers simply too small? Does God want to do so much for us that we have a hard time even imagining it?

So we need to come back to the first verses of this reading. God comes with vengeance, with a recompense, a pay back, which belongs to him. He comes to save us, to rescue us. Those two thoughts side by side are really the preacher's task. God comes to deal with sin and sinners, he comes to save us. The old man cannot but be terrified at the thought of God coming to finally deal with sin and sinners. He denies it, he hates it, and he scurries into the darkness hoping to avoid being seen.

But the new man, the redeemed man, the man who rose up from the waters of baptism loves this word that God is coming with vengeance and recompense. He will be freed of the sin which clings so tightly and which encumbers us so much. He hears the "God comes to save us." and rejoices in that promise.

The preacher of this text needs to be aware that both men are sitting before you on Sunday. The old sinners are there, they will hear this and be terrified by its implications. Their fear has to be addressed, not necessarily assuaged, but addressed. That fear will likely be expressed as anger, perhaps anger at you. The coming of God into the present reality is a fearful thing for every human being. I really believe that much of the conflict we see in our churches is really an expression of fear, a fear that is driven out not by argument or resources, but by the perfect love of Jesus.

On the other hand, that congregation also includes the redeemed and regenerate men and women whom God has raised to new life. This expectation of God spurs them to lives of virtue, service, compassion, and love. But we keep talking to them as if they are only the old men and

women of the old Adam sitting there, we will stunt that regenerate life. This proclamation unleashes all sorts of things in a person, positive but sometimes wild and uncontrollable things. The Spirit does blow where he wants to blow. That person too needs to be addressed, his passion for God encouraged and nurtured, her service and gifts held up as a good thing, a Godly thing.

The preacher today has a tough job with this. If I say “take heart, God is coming.” Can I really say that and not include my own self in that? In other words, if someone comes to us in need, can we talk about a future God and not admit that in my own hands and my own lips and in my own life God is working to solve this problem? That is frightening. God does not ask for and work with my excess, he does not take my advice, he takes me, he puts all me to the task. Remember the disciples and the loaves at the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus did not ask for what they had left over, but took it all.

Is Isaiah really speaking to a community today who doesn't think that God has any vengeance? Do we have a hard time saying that God hates and fights against cancer or some other disease when we see so many of our friends and loved ones succumbing to it? Do we really think that God does have vengeance against the problems I face? That he might just come and show up on my side and fight for me against some foe?

Psalm 146

¹ Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

² I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

³ Put not your trust in princes,

in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

⁴ When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;

on that very day his plans perish.

⁵ Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the LORD his God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them,

who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed,

who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the sojourners;

he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, to all generations.
Praise the LORD!

This very important little psalm deserves our attention, if nothing else than for the line in verse 3 which says that we should not trust in princes. In a day and age when the idea of the “state” has overwhelmed almost every other system of culture and society, this verse needs to be on the lips of Christians regularly. When something is wrong too often people exclaim something like “there ought to be a law...” But the truth is that the state, for all the good that it can accomplish in curbing the sinful tendencies of people and providing safe and secure places for us to live, the state cannot solve the human dilemma. Trust not in princes, presidents, legislators, or the solutions provided by the government, not matter how fair, just, and good it is. For all the good it can do, the state cannot deliver it is not the Good.

The first words on the lips of Christians who see the suffering of the world needs to be “Lord, have mercy!” not “There ought to be a law!” Blessed is the one whose help is in the Lord. He is the one who executes true justice for the poor and oppressed, the little people and the great people. He brings the ways of the wicked to ruin.

That is not a manifesto for Christian disengagement, but it is a call for Christians to see their political and other efforts to be opportunities not for human will and power to be exercised but for God’s good and gracious will to be done in part.

James 2:1-10, 14-18 *Again, the editors of the pericope system have given us the important bits in here, but this time I wonder if they are also not conducting a little conflict avoidance. The preacher needs to be aware of some of this, so I have included the whole chapter for our consideration.*

¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

⁸ If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹ *For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.* ¹² *So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.* ¹³ *For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!* ²⁰ *Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?* ²¹ *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?* ²² *You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;* ²³ *and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.* ²⁴ *You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.* ²⁵ *And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?* ²⁶ *For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*

This opening chapter is unfortunately elided here, as is a middle section of this reading and the end of the chapter. There are a number of assumptions that play into the interpretation of this letter to varying degrees. The first of them is the identity of James. Ancient authors are in general agreement that this is not James the Elder nor James the Lesser of the apostolic band but James the Just, the “brother” of Jesus who was the second leader of the church in Jerusalem. James is the Greek version of the Hebrew name “Jacob” and was very common among Jews of Palestine. (Richard Bauckham has a fascinating discussion of the names of Palestinian Jews in the first century in his book, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, published by Eerdmans in 2008.)

The best scholarly take on this letter is that we have something in two stages. It appears that James preached this sometimes before his martyrdom in the early 60’s. As the first century passed through the middle decades, the Zealot party was growing increasingly influential and the population seemed to radicalizing. James was the generally well respected leader of the Christian movement in Jerusalem and hence a target. A group of radicals seized a moment and had him convicted of blasphemy and hurled from the top of the temple. When he did not die, they supposedly hauled him out of the city and stoned him to death. Josephus indicates that he was generally mourned by Jews and Christians alike as a just man who was terribly treated.

Within a few years of James' death the Zealots took complete control of the city and launched a rebellion. They thought it was the right moment since Nero's madness made him increasingly ineffective as a ruler. But the Praetorian Guard also was able to see this and they slew Nero later that year. Because there was no heir in the Julio-Claudian line, a civil war broke out as multiple men vied for the Imperial throne. Called the year of the four emperors, it could have been a perfect moment to foment a rebellion, but it did not turn out that way. The Senate dispatched one of their own, Vespasian, a capable military man to put down the rebellion. When the civil war broke out, he realized that he might be able to seize the throne himself. He promoted himself as a "Law and Order" candidate in the face of the tumult facing the empire. Vespasian brutally suppressed the Jewish revolt, sacked and burned the city of Jerusalem, including the temple. (It has never been rebuilt.) His strategy worked. He did become the next emperor and his two sons who accompanied him on the Jewish campaign ruled after him. You can still see Titus' triumphal arch in Rome. Amid all the captives and treasure depicted on its walls, there is the clear silhouette of a large Jewish menorah sticking up. If you go, you will likely also visit the Colosseum which was built by the 50,000+ Jewish slaves he brought back to Rome.

For the Christians of Jerusalem the revolt had terrible consequences. They were scattered into the countryside where they met a hostile reception from their Jewish siblings, cousins, parents, and community. It seems the Christians did not participate in the revolt and the Jews considered them traitors for it, even though the revolt never enjoyed unanimous support. The Christians were isolated and kicked out of the synagogues. Many think that Matthew's Gospel was written to this persecuted and discouraged community. We also think that someone picked up these sermons of James, repackaged them a little, and sent them out to the members of that dispersed Christian community.

At least that is the reconstruction that seems to answer a bunch of questions. There are some places in the book where the "voice" of the author seems to change. The letter reads very much like a sermon but transitions clumsily on occasion. We of course have very little ability to document any of this. We know that Vespasian did what he did. We know that the Christians were evicted from the Synagogues at this time. We know that James was martyred sometime in the middle of the first century. But the bit about the repackaging of his letter is conjecture.

From the letter itself, we can surmise that James was speaking to a Christian audience which was well versed in the Jewish Old Testament. They also were suffering from a certain complacency in their faith. It seems that they were using the gift of God's love as a license to do very little. Some have also thought that James is dealing with people who have read Paul and perhaps misread Paul's words on salvation by grace alone. That might explain how they can do nothing.

If our reconstruction of this letter is accurate, this is perhaps the earliest Christian literature in the New Testament, at least as a sermon of James. In the first paragraph notice that he is holding up an ideal of egalitarian equality, a class-less society that was supposed to obtain inside the

confines of the Church. Also notice that he has to bring this up. They were not apparently doing a very good job of this! But if you read the initial chapters of Acts carefully, there is some indication that this is what the earliest Christians in Jerusalem tried to do.

It is the second part of this pericope and the omitted final verses of the chapter that creates the biggest problem for folks, certainly it did for Luther. For Luther the problem was that this seemed to lend support to the “Papists” and their theology of merit, at least they thought so and argued with Luther from the text so much that he was ready to kick it out of the canon. (Timothy Wengert has an excellent treatment of Luther’s opinions of James in Reading the Bible with Luther, published by Baker, 2013.) Luther’s problem is not so much with what James says, he rather approves of the book for what it says. Luther’s struggle is that James did not adequately push Christ as the solution to the problem.

James is not arguing for a salvation by works. He is arguing for a salvation that makes a difference in the way that we live our lives. Luther and Lutherans love Paul because he so clearly states the beautiful truth that we are saved by God’s grace. But James brings a very necessary component to this conversation. Saved by God’s grace, we are not left in our sin nor do we remain the same people whom Jesus once died for. We are to be the transformed people of God. James argues that Christians should love differently, that empowered by God they can live differently, and that the faithful relationship with God means they will live differently.

The real question is whether we as preachers think our people have become comfortable Christians, partakers of Bonhoeffer’s “Cheap Grace” or whether they are indifferent to the Gospel because they have not heard it proclaimed winsomely and graciously. Both of them are plausible reasons why our congregations are not vibrant and growing places in the midst of such a sinful generation.

Mark 7:(24-30) 31-37

²⁴ And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. ²⁵ But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet.

²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁸ But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹ And he said to her, “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” ³⁰ And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. ³⁴ And

looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”³⁵ And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.³⁶ And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.³⁷ And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

In the last two weeks of reading Mark, we have heard Jesus speak in conflict with the Pharisees and then in some sharp teaching with his own disciples, but it is hard to remember sometimes that in the narrative arc of the Gospel itself, this is only a couple paragraphs of material.

Because we get them spread out over a month, with all the other activities that take place in late August and early September, it is too easy for us to forget that the stories which comprise today’s reading are intended to lie right next door to the words which Jesus spoke to the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law in the first part of this chapter and to his disciples.

So we really need to keep these things in mind:

- 1. Jesus said that true worship and service to God is a matter of what is inside us. It is not the externals which make us Christians, but it is the relationship with God which makes our actions Christian. (This is not to say that the externals are unimportant, but to say that they are made even more important by the relationship which God has established)*
- 2. Thus what comes out of our mouths is more important than what goes in. It is not a matter of eating the right kosher diet but of speaking the right words and doing the right things. We have a God problem when we consider all of the things which come boiling up unbidden from heart. That is the important thing.*
- 3. The evil that comes out of us defiles us, but also the good that comes out of us is a witness to the good that God has planted inside of us.*

This week Mark gives us two stories which are told in this place to help us see that point. First of all, the Syro-Phonician woman whom we addressed last week in our treatment of these words. She is as far from kosher as you can get and yet out of her mouth come words of tremendous and remarkable faith.

It is very interesting that Jesus cannot be alone in the first part of this pericope. He tried to be hidden, but he could not do it. Later, he wants the people to be quiet, but he cannot do it. Yet, this is the Jesus who commands the demons to be quiet and they obey. He commands deaf ears to be opened and they are. But Jesus cannot stop ministry (it is his very nature) and he cannot stop the proclamation of the Gospel (it is the very reason for his mission from the Father). Mark’s audience is being told to stop ministry and to be quiet. Is Mark really telling them that the ministry and the message will go out? This is the very reason that Jesus has come, this is very nature of His kingdom which has come. (Mark 1) Not even Jesus authority or efforts can stop this.

We are made uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus cannot do something. But I think the gospel is found in the fact that his very nature cannot be undone. Jesus could have gotten alone. He has the power to do that. He could have exercised power and caused all the people in that village to be mute as he healed the speech impediment. He could have waved his hand and caused them all to be silent. But that is not him. His love and nature just don't go there. He is unable to silence them, he is unable to completely withdraw from the creation which he loves.

How did this woman's great faith get in there? How were her lips opened to speak these words of faith to Jesus? The story of the deaf and mute man which immediately follows her story is the answer to that question. Jesus returns, through Sidon (Jezebel's home town) and into the region of Galilee and the Decapolis. This is the interface of the Jewish and Gentile communities. We cannot know whether this man was a Jew or a Gentile, and the point is obviously that this does not matter!

*The man cannot hear and thus cannot speak plainly. If you have ever worked with deaf people you know this makes sense and the ancients understood this too. Deafness is a terrible affliction, even worse than blindness, but I would not like either of them. Deafness really isolates the person. They are cut off from community. The blind man can speak with you, interact. He may not be able to hold down a job, but he can at least participate in Sunday dinner's conversation with the rest of the group. But the deaf man eats his bread in total isolation unless he can signal with his hands and communicate with sign language, but then, he is not eating his bread, he is waving his hands around. To communicate he must set down his meal or the other task at hand. This sounds contrived, but it is actually much larger than we give it credit. If forced to make the choice, I would rather be blind than be deaf. I pray I die with two working eyes and ears to see **and** hear my grandchildren laughing.*

The crowds present this man to Jesus. Clearly those who do so are hoping for a miracle, they want something to tell the kids that night when they get home, they want a story. Jesus is quickly becoming a circus act, a performer. I call this the "Oprafication" of Jesus. Today we don't put the strange things in the circus anymore, we put them on a tv show like Oprah so that we can see something gross and be fascinated by it. I remember that when I was much younger I was kept glued to the TV when some Buddhist monk who practiced some breathing and stretching regimen contorted himself inside a tiny glass box and was sealed in for half an hour or so only to emerge unscathed. He was practicing his faith, I was at the circus; although, he was also a willing participant in all this.

Jesus will have none of this. He takes the man aside, privately. He will not be manipulated into a performance, but he will also not let this man suffer. He takes him aside, puts his fingers into his ears. He spits and puts the spittle on the tongue. And then he sighs, looking up to heaven, and says "Ephphatha." It almost sounds like a sigh when you read this in church.

Remember when Jesus healed the woman's daughter of the demonic possession? He did it from a distance. He did not need to wave his hand or touch her? Why is he using spittle and putting his fingers in this man's ears? Anthropologists who read this story and others like it in the Gospels

immediately recognize what Jesus is doing here. This is what a shaman looks like, what the missionaries often called the witch-doctor. Does that scandalize you? Jesus is acting like the faith healers of his day. Clearly he does not need to, but he does do it. I wonder why? Does this help the man? Does it help the disciples somehow? Is it supposed to help us?

The whole thing is designed to emphasize the humanity of the poor fellow who cannot hear. They have brought him to be a subject for their curiosity, but Jesus won't allow it. He takes him aside. He cannot speak to the man, he does not hear. So he acts out what is going on. You wonder if the man even knew who this Jesus was. Spittle was widely believed to have healing power, it was thought to contain the spirit of the person. Jesus puts his fingers into the man's ears, to do that he has to be face to face with the fellow. I always imagine that Jesus had very articulate eyes. He would have had to look this man in the eye, the keen eyes of a deaf man. And then he sighs, and speaks the word "be opened." I wonder if he did not do this with very clear enunciation so the deaf man, perhaps who could read lips, would simply be able to know what was going on.

Suddenly the man can hear. His speech is clear because he can hear it.

This is the answer to the question which lies in the material which proceeds. How does the woman have the words to say? How does the sinner's heart become a heart from which beautiful and holy things proceed? It is because Jesus opens ears and loosens tongues. He puts those holy and beautiful things inside our hearts and he draws them out of us as he drew them out of the Syrophoenician woman.

Jesus ministry to the individuals in the Gospel is always individualistic. He heals one this way and another one another way. We like to put people into categories and make our ministries formulaic. But Jesus never does this. He always meets the person where they are at. The deaf man needed the touch, needed to the face to face contact, and needed to be with Jesus. The woman needed something else in the first story we read. Jairus's daughter needed another thing.

In a very real sense, this is a missions and evangelism text. How will we speak the good news of God's kingdom to this world? It will be because God has come, recompense in hand, in a cross to save us, in water and word and sacrament to wash and feed and speak tenderly to us. He has opened our ears to hear and our lips to speak. As I have often said before, evangelism is always telling the story of what has happened to you, not to someone else. No one else can tell your story just as you really cannot tell someone else's story.

Scripture in this context is the norm, the rule against which we measure our story. Does it look like the same Jesus acting in my story? Do I recognize the man who opened this man's ears and loosened his tongue? Yes! Then my testimony is true and good. If I have nothing to say because I cannot point to God doing anything in my life, then we have a totally different issue and the preacher haranguing me to be an evangelist is worse than foolish, it is evil. If I listen to such preaching, I will make a terrible mess of things as I try to tell another's story or as I try to make one up. More likely I will simply be driven away, feeling guilty that I was a bad Christian, never having tasted of the Lord's goodness.

Law

1. God is expecting something of me, words and deeds which are to flow out of my heart to his glory and praise. And I really don't have a clue about how to do that. When I take a look down inside my own heart, I am not encouraged by what I see there. Jesus was right, there is some nasty stuff down there.
2. What is more, I am not entirely certain that even want to live that sort of life. I am weary, I am busy, I am under a great deal of stress. Do I really want to do this? It sounds boring and it sounds like a lot of work. Can't God find someone else?
3. Now as a preacher and as a congregation, I am supposed to shepherd and lead people to lives of genuine service and love in this community. The rest of the world is watching us, and I am really afraid of what they are seeing.
4. We are so convinced that we have this garbage in our hearts that we cannot believe God would actually hear our prayers and answer them.
5. We try the façade thing, but it doesn't really work. The visitors come to our congregation and they don't come back very often. I am afraid that they can see that we are really a bunch of fakers. We have tried to market ourselves to our community, but we have not really backed up that marketing campaign with anything like the genuine love and faith and goodness which our moveable type sign outside has lead them to expect when they walk through our doors.
6. I am trying so hard and failing. What is wrong with me? What is wrong with us? This worked for my parents' generation, why isn't it working for us? Has Luther's prediction of the Spirit leaving the faithless Germans really come true? It appears to have happened in Germany, is it happening among their heirs here in North America?

Gospel

1. God is the creator of the world he wants. He has sent His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, into the flesh of humanity that he would bring forth the praise to God which we are clueless to give to him. The renovation of my heart, especially my will and my motivation, is his job, not mine. I will be right there, I may even at times hinder it, but I cannot take credit here, but must give it where it belongs.
2. Christ fills us with a passion and a desire for him which transcends understanding. The world cannot see this and so it labels the Christian life boring. "They eat Jello, don't they?" But there is no greater adventure than orthodoxy and faith. When we partake of the supper we hold in our hand the secret to the power of the universe. When we speak his love, God is backing up our words. When we splash that baptismal water, God is giving eternal life.

3. God is a great PR man. What looks like total failure and miserable loss to me he turns to victory and powerful witness. Great sin is often the occasion for great forgiveness. Stumbling may just put us down on the level with the very folks who need us most.
4. The people at the scene in the gospel are astonished at what Jesus did, but he did exactly what he asked of them. God is hearing our prayers too. he might just do exactly what we ask him to do! There is not really a reason to be surprised at that!
5. And so he empowers our honesty. We don't need to be all things to all people. There are lots of Christians in this town. We can be ourselves and count on God to lead us to the folks he wants us to meet. We can speak to them of the beautiful things that we have seen, we can love them with the love of Christ, and God will quicken in them the relationship of faith.
6. Of course we are failures at listening and at speaking God's kingdom news. What is new about that? But Jesus today looks us in the eye, puts his fingers in our ears, and sighs to heaven "Ephphatha" and our ears are opened and our tongues loosed once more to be the proclaimers of His good news for this world and this community. We have a story to tell, our story, and it is a good one because Jesus is part of it, forgiving the sins, healing the hurts, befriending the lonely, and comforting the grieving. It is a good story, a story of real people like you and me, in fact it is the story of you and me.

Sermon Ideas

1. Ears unstopped and tongue loosed (Epistle and Gospel: That the hearer would believe that Jesus has put their head between his hands, looked them in the eye and opened their ears and loosened their tongue that they might tell the story of His love for them.)

This sermon is a missional/evangelist sermon. The second sermon is really for a hurting/discouraged congregation.

While Jesus's words earlier in the Gospel might work well to set up these deeds of Jesus with the Syro-Phoenician woman and the deaf/mute man, James also does a very good job of it, and may in fact speak more pointedly to a North American Christianity which has frequently lost its way. We are so concerned about money these days – do our treasurer's reports always precede the Evangelism report? Should it?

Jesus does this one person at a time. There is no group miracles, but one blind man, one deaf woman, one cripple, one demoniac at a time he liberates people from the bondage of Satan and sin. Jesus has been talking about all the terrible things that come from the hearts of a person, most of them out of the mouth, most of them out of the sinful lips and perverse tongues with which we are born. It is in there, and it comes out in every sin, in every bilious feeling. That is why Mark has us see Jesus take this man who cannot speak right today and touch his tongue, penetrate his stopped up ears, and sigh deeply, "Ephphatha"

We can turn the evangelistic act into a spectator sport, but God works one person at a time. We get wrapped up in being the actor in the conversion event. But it is Christ who opens the ears. It is Christ who opens the heart and creates it new. It is Jesus who loosens the tongue to speak. Just as he has done that to us, he also does that to others through us, yes, but it is still him doing it. I splash the water, but he washes away the sins.

Evangelism is not about getting them to agree with us. Evangelism is telling the Jesus story, especially the Jesus story in my own life. Christ will make that seed sprout, grow and bear its faithful fruit. I don't have to make them agree with me. They may not even look like they are listening to me. In fact, it is much more likely that they are simply watching me.

What was it like for that deaf man to look in Jesus' eyes? If you imagine this scene, it must have been marvelous to have Jesus, the Lord and Creator of all put his hands on either side of your head and look you in the eye, and suddenly you could hear, you could speak. Is it any wonder that they said, "He does all things well!"?

Jesus has done the same thing to us, opened our ears and loosed our tongues to sing his praise. He knows what is in our hearts, he knows we cannot do this. So he has come to us in Baptism and Supper, in Word and Community to enter our hearts and create something new and fresh there, something which belongs to that time before the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, something that is full of life. You might talk about the creation restored in Isaiah here.

This is a great day to point out the people and places where you can see that new creation clearly. Is it the little old woman whom you buried last year who was on the altar guild all the time? Was it the old duffer who delivered meals on wheels to the "old folks" some of whom were much younger than himself? Was it the young person in your congregation who got the award for service at the local high school or the outgoing board of education chairwoman who gave her all for your Sunday School? It could be those and a hundred more. This is a day to point people to the really good things that God is doing among us, give him credit, and rejoice in them with a holy joy.

We want to avoid being the "other nine" in the Luke 17 passage where Jesus heals the ten lepers. In that story, the one leper returns, praising God and falling down before Jesus. Witnessing to people is not coming up with a story, but it is telling the story we have already gotten.

2. "Be Strong, Fear Not! Behold you God comes with Vengeance/Rescue! (OT: That the hearer would faithfully and joyfully anticipate the action of God in his/her life, confident that God always comes to save and not destroy.)

What is the wilderness our people face? For several of the preachers, we were speaking to congregations which were in long vacancies. The desert, the wilderness seemed like a long process which seemed to have no end. Does the preacher today simply say that there

is a preacher God has in mind? Does the preacher say that God does have blessings for us too? Even if it is our fault – after all, the Israelites pretty much brought the problems down upon their own heads. God pledges his salvation to the miserable Old Testament people who had made such a mess of things themselves, by their unfaithfulness.

The old man is strong in us; he loves his sin, his passions, and his appetites. If we are honest, we have to admit that the old man is pretty much a part of each one of us. He doesn't really go away at our baptism, in fact sometimes he works all the harder on when we are baptized, crashing every sanctified party, asserting his ugly face even in blessed times. Ever had a great family time turn into a terrible fight? Ever seen a marriage crack up right in front of your eyes? I once counseled a foolish young man who had an affair with a co-worker while his sweet wife and infant child were still in the hospital where he worked. His marriage had been something beautiful and precious and he ruined it all with his selfish desire.

The thought of any of us coming into the presence of God should really strike terror into our hearts. Jesus has for the last two weeks been talking about all the things that are wrong with us. He knows them all. There is no sin hidden from him. If we think we have buried it, you can bet that our enemy, Satan, has it written in his little ugly book and will drag it out into the light on judgment day.

But God exhorts his people to take courage. The psalmist delights that God rules. The blind man who could not hear and who could not ask Jesus for help because he was so messed up, finds himself looking into the eyes of his compassionate savior as Jesus opens his ears and loosens his tongue.

Don't underestimate the power of people to blame themselves for troubles. We often remember best our very worst moments. But the Gospel today tells us that we have not gotten what we deserved from God, we have gotten so much better. In tough situations, this can be hard to say and the preacher needs to exercise some care here. After all, it might not seem like such a good place. But the truth is that God has not sent the destruction which we ought receive, but he has sent his Son. God has come with recompense and vengeance in his hand, but when the stroke would fall, it fell on Jesus' broken body hanging on a cross. God is satisfied, and now he delights in what he has done.

Like the deaf and mute man, Jesus has come and put his hands on my head. He holds me, he breaks through my deaf ears, he opens my tongue. I don't need to find a rescuer, I am not looking for one, he has come, he is here, he is holding me in his gaze right now.

This sermon will want to get people to cast their vision toward that beautiful thing God has created in Christ, a beauty which is in part realized now in forgiven relationship, in families which love, in parents who care, children who respect, neighbors who love, etc. This is the great restoration, the burning sands transformed into a pool.

3. He sets the prisoners free! (Psalm and Gospel – That the hearer would trust God to be the solution to his/her life problems, both great and small.)

The world likes to put itself forward as the solution to our problems and in doing that it would usurp the place which belongs to God. This is a first commandments sort of sermon, but it plays on a particular way to understand who is our God or who is the One who gets our worship. Luther's definition of a God is what is at play here. He said that your God was the person or thing which you thought would do for you the greatest good. You will serve that one and it will always get your very best. For many people, they would say that they themselves are the ones who do themselves the greatest good. Thus they become self-worshippers or self-idolatrous. They are sure to take care of themselves.

This sermon, however, acknowledges that there are others who are vying for that role in our lives, demanding our allegiance and filling our lives with worshipful allegiances.

Often these are not bad things in and of themselves. They are in fact quite good, but when they are practiced outside the relationship to God, they become idolatrous because they purport to solve the dilemmas which only God can truly solve.

Here are three but there are surely more:

- a. Nationalism/Patriotism – It demands our allegiance, has its own liturgies (think singing the national anthem at every sporting event) and often the state really attempts to be the solution to the problems of our human condition. If we just jiggle the tax code, fix welfare, write the proper laws, etc., we will achieve a true happiness. We need to be all for a fair tax code, good laws and programs, but we cannot imagine that this is what brings us peace and true joy. Government is indeed an instrument in which the will of God can be done for the sake of the whole population. God wants fair and good laws and programs and he delights when the hungry are fed and the poor are cared for. But this sermon will cast the hearer's hope past the government to the true solutions to these problems which lie in God's capable hands, not congress' less than capable hands.
- b. Sports – this might seem like a far-fetched idea, but I have seen grown men insanely committed to something as ridiculous as the Oregon Ducks or the OSU Beavers. I like football games as much as the next fellow, but when talk of the next game overwhelms all else in my life is there something that is out of sync here? Like patriotism, this also has its liturgies which demand our allegiance. Games are held in massive, temple like structures. Their broadcasts demand our attention and cause us to ignore the people around us and their needs. Please don't get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with relaxing in front of a football game. I rather enjoy it too. But how does it give me to treat the people around me. Am I worshipping here? Do I think that this is where my true happiness lies?

- c. Consumerism – This is the particularly American idolatry. Walk through a mall and see all the banners in the windows of the shops. “Sale!” “Great Deals!” and of course beautiful models have fun wearing and using the product. The mall bids us to make our sacrifice through the priest/priestess (cashier) and offers us the hope that if we just get the right thing at the right price then we can be really happy. We can have communion with the right sort of people. We will “belong.”

Of course all these things sound absolutely ridiculous when we cast it this way. But in truth do we look for happiness at the mall? Do we abuse, neglect our families in the response to the demand of the football game for our attention? Do we turn our hope for peace and joy to proper government instead of God? Do we get far more riled up about who will be president than we do to hear what God says?

Trust not in princes, says the psalmist. It is God who rescues the poor and sustains the downtrodden and frees the prisoners.

Here the preacher will want to proclaim the Jesus who opens the ears and loosens the tongue of the deaf/mute in the story. He might even do the same thing to us. Can we put the sports page down long enough to talk to our children? Jesus can plant a new heart and mind in us which sees sports for what they are, an entertainment. He can open our ears and call forth from our hearts a life which sees the products as tools by which we can serve him instead of the source our happiness. He can tune our hopes to see through the government and the rhetoric of presidential candidates to see that he is working mightily for the poor and needy and that might happen here this way or there another way, but he is the hope of these people and me because he is the one who rescues.

4. I'll show you my faith by my works (Epistle: That the Holy Spirit would awaken the heart of the hearer to passionate and vigorous faith.)

This sermon is for the complacent congregation. Too often Lutherans have used Paul's message of God's free gift to be a license to do so very little. We don't have urgency to our mission or to our service. It can wait until tomorrow, and it always does. But Jesus is urgent and James is speaking to this sort of urgency.

James is speaking to people who are complacently letting the world set the agenda for them. They have heard Paul's message as well. They get the grace thing, but they are not really getting it. As a result they are taking the grace but not letting the grace take them. The world makes the distinctions between rich and poor. The people of God do not. So why are they?

The preacher will likely notice that there are lots of places where the congregation he preaches to could look like this. It might not be socio-economic divisions. It could be all sorts of ways that this happens. But that is the easy part of this sermon.

The preacher will want to make this uncomfortable, but also to preach Christ in this. When it comes to the Gospel, he may want to preach about the man whose ears and tongue Jesus loosed. Can you imagine that he ever spent a morning in lonely quiet ever again? Do you suppose he was every quiet in the morning? He talked. He could talk. He loved to talk. He delighted in the voices and the sounds which now filled his world. Jesus has also opened our ears and loosened our tongues. Do we just settle for our old life when Jesus has given us something totally new? How can that be?

If you can get the YouTube of the toddler who gets the cochlear implant and now can hear, that might make this a really powerful sermon.

The people in James' community are letting the old way continue to dictate to them their behaviors. But James upbraids them because he can hardly understand that. Jesus has given them a new thing. James says what he says because behind this whole outrage he has stands the redemption and freedom which Christ has for them. He is almost preaching to prisoners for whom the gates of the prison have been blown open, but they sit in the courtyard, still acting like prisoners. They are people whose eyes have been opened but who have their eyelids screwed tightly shut. They are formerly deaf people who wear earplugs. He just doesn't get it. It is inane to him.

Jesus is not this way, but fortunately he still opens stoppered ears, calls out beautiful confessions, and loves really foolish people, even us. He calls his people today to a new life of passionate and vigorous Christianity. He calls it forth, he empowers it and creates it.