

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B
September 6, 2009
The Reverend Robert P. Travis

“Be Opened”

Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146; James 2:1-10,14-17; Mark 7:24-37

The Syro-phoenician woman's encounter with Jesus dominates the gospel reading today. It draws our attention with Jesus' shocking statement that likens this woman, and all non-Jews to dogs. And further compels our focus when the woman responds so cleverly to Jesus, and seems to manipulate his change of mind. The message behind this is almost cliché and I'm sure you will hear it again, as we are struggling with the very same issues in our time over who is welcome, who is allowed to receive God's healing grace. And furthermore, I think we're doing a pretty good job at Ascension of being welcoming, we've turned a corner as far as that is concerned, and I believe we're headed in the direction Jesus was going, and wants us to go. So I'm not going to talk about that today, because I believe the man at the end of the story, the deaf man with the speech impediment, I believe he has some thing to say to us.

The interesting thing in this story is that this man doesn't come to Jesus on his own, He is brought to Jesus by others, it doesn't say who just “They brought him.” And they who brought him, begged Jesus to lay his hand on him. I'm sure they did that because they had heard, or maybe even seen, that when Jesus laid his hand on people, they were healed. So they demanded the same treatment for their friend. But Jesus was not going to be so controlled, and he certainly wasn't limited by a given method to heal. It's almost as if Jesus was being playful, and having fun with the abundance of God's healing grace. He had just healed the woman's daughter, without even being present with her, much less laying a hand on her. So when the people beg him to lay his hand on the deaf/mute man, pay attention to what happened. The text says, “He took him aside, in private, away from the crowd.”

Jesus was not going to be forced to do things, exactly the way they wanted him to, and yet their prayer would be answered, just the way Jesus intended to do it. So Jesus does more than just lay his hand on the man, he puts his fingers in his ears, and spits and touches his tongue. As if that were not enough, he sighs and looks up to heaven, and says “Be Opened”

He treats the man to a much more intimate encounter with Jesus than almost anyone else who received healing. You know that if Jesus had done those things in public, he would have people all over the place, trying to imitate him, and believing that spitting, sighing, and Ephatha, were a sort of magic formula to heal deafness and speech impediments.

But it doesn't work that way with God - God seems to delight in doing things differently, in showing a tremendous variety of action, it is not a one size fits all creation, and our God does not offer a one-size fits all healing. He encounters each person on his own terms, and treats each one to an individual experience taking into account many unseen circumstances, and engaging the person with his entire being, body, mind and spirit.

But we continually try to get God to fit into our neat little box, to confine his actions to formulas we can understand and emulate. God was not so confined when he created the world, with its seemingly infinite and ever increasing variety, and he will not be so confined in our lives. But he will also not leave our needs unattended to. There's this tension throughout our faith history, between our freedom, and God's mercy to us.

This is displayed again, when Jesus tells the people who witness this healing, not to tell anyone. For whatever reason, it was not the time and place to spread it around. But in their freedom, the people proclaim it anyway. And the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaim the great things he had done.

To their credit, they recognized in Jesus the fulfillment of prophecy, when they say "He has done everything well," they mean, he is fulfilling the prophecies of scriptures to the T! Even healing the deaf and mute in one incidence. That does make Jesus astounding, beyond any other religious or healing leader, before or since. The prophecies about him were fulfilled by his life, and yet he did not go about methodically fulfilling prophecy, but rather encountered people where they were, and did what was necessary for them.

But still, you would think, after displaying that kind of power, that people would feel compelled to follow what he directed them to do, or refrain from doing what he told them not to do.

But God does not lead that way. And consequently, however we may not understand it the plans change, as we change our minds about what to do, and still, however miraculously, prophecies are fulfilled and God's plan is carried out, in spite of all the ways we seem to block it. That is the sign of an all-powerful God, who is at the same time completely loving and merciful to us. Can you imagine what it would be like, if we treated each other

that way? If when someone gets in the way of what we want to do, we simply move on and change means of our plan, and love them through it, rather than dragging them into court or letting their freedom get in the way of our relationship?

This is completely counter to the way human tradition seems to lead us, completely opposed to how we normally go about things.

As we enter a new phase of life at Ascension, I wonder if we could strive to follow that example, and if that might lead us down a different path, than where we have gone in the past, when the inevitable disagreements arise? Or maybe that is too much to ask. Maybe we can't be that much like Jesus in this broken and sinful world. Maybe in order to do that, we need hear Jesus sigh, and say to us "be opened."

But the alternative that leaves us, as his followers is to do what he tells us to do. Unlike the people in this gospel reading, who were instructed not to tell about what he had done, to keep his messiahship secret for a time, we live in the time of Jesus as our Lord, we are two thousand and nine years into the Lordship of Christ, as the AD abbreviation would tell us.

So perhaps we can do what he says, and our challenge is easier than the order to keep the secret. Our challenge is to go and make disciples of Jesus, to all around us, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to do everything Jesus commanded us to do.

That is the Great Commission of our Lord. We are entering a newly rejuvenated effort, to be faithful to Jesus here at Ascension. It runs counter to what most Episcopalians have done in the past, so the temptation, is to follow the people in the scripture, who ignored Jesus, and did their own thing. Maybe this change in culture, also requires our hearing Jesus sigh, and saying to us "be opened."

Show Jesus that we can learn the lesson of two thousand years of teaching. Spread the good news, as you have experienced it, to everyone you know. And strive to at the very least, bring one or two new people to Ascension to meet Jesus this year. Be opened, to what Jesus is doing in our midst.

Opportunities will abound, the fulfilling of the Great Commission is in your hands.