

Trinity 12-2020

2 Cor. 3: ff

Mark 7: 31ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

Today, and for a number of Sundays during this mid-season after Trinity, we will hear story after story in which we are encountered by Jesus the miracle worker and healer. It may get downright repetitive as one miracle after another is retold. While we may speak of miracles in terms of medical healing or unexplainable reversals of illness, we do so somewhat metaphorically. We live in an age of skepticism about such claims. In fact, we are surrounded in our time by a level of skepticism that has come to doubt its own canons of truth so that even logical and rational arguments are ignored and replaced by “personal reality”, especially when faced with unpleasant facts that are contrary to what we desire to hold as true. This is the context into which we hear what the N.T. has to say, and it requires that we remain open. Without being open we become deaf to the Word, Jesus, who is God's activity.

Understand that all of the authors of the Gospels, as well as his detractors, viewed and proclaimed that Jesus was a person who performed remarkable actions on behalf of others. In doing so, we get a preview of who he is. We will see this brought to an apogee next Lent when in the crucifixion narratives his enemies proclaim, “He saved others, but cannot save himself”. That is, he made people whole again and even the accusation is understood to be true. What follows, and will be incisive, is also the story of those who are made whole by him! We may find spaces in their encounter with Jesus where we fit, and the miracles and healings become more than off-handed comment!!

This morning we listen to St. Mark. His work, like all the evangelists, is unique. Where Luke is prosaic and has finesse, Mark is rough and rustic. Unlike John whose language soars mystically, here we have down to earth and very human expressions. We get the Messianic Secret—don't tell anyone who I am. Of course, it is the reader who already knows the truth, while the participants in the stories don't get it. This miracle fits into a chapter which begins with Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees over food, defilement, and the question of what harms a person. He eventually proclaims, “It is not what goes into a person that defiles them, but what comes out of them”, speaking spiritually and relationally. Then we get the twin stories of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter and the healing of this man who is deaf and has a speech impediment both of whom are social outcasts. What is Mark's intent? If food isn't defiled, then neither are those who society casts aside! God doesn't stop at our blockages; God is always seeking to remove and heal what keeps us from Him.

So, we hear what appears to be a clear and simple story from St. Mark's Gospel. It contains words with which we are all familiar, but their meaning for St. Mark is not quite the same as our contemporary use of them. First, he seems to stammer a bit in that he repeats the word “and” over and over and over again—look at the text. He is not at a loss for writing the story more smoothly. This is intentional; it is a sign of urgency and importance. He is building up a head of steam telling us to look forward in order to hear the real heart of the miracle. Second, he uses the Aramaic “Ephatha”, which literally means ‘cut him loose’ or free him from exile; a sign of God's intention for His people. Third, the word used to describe this man's condition is used only twice in

Scripture; here and in Isaiah 35—"And then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped...and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy"—all pointing to God's victory over all that ails us. Fourth, the people say, "He does all things well", which is not merely a passing compliment, but refers back to Genesis and the creation where everything is done well and is Good. Finally, Mark puts this story right before the crucible encounter of Jesus and Peter where the question is asked, "Who do you say that I am?" This story is a magnifying glass bringing to focus what the Kingdom of God looks like, and Who the bringer of that Kingdom is. The Reign of God is marked and recognized by removing occluded hearing and by the healing and freedom from sin and brokenness which is too often our experience in life. St. Mark is saying that two forces are at battle in this life vying for us; one is sin which makes us partial and broken, and the other is God's redeeming love which is setting us, and others we might not count as worthy, free to be whole and to live lives which praise the goodness of God and His creation. We, too, are this man in Mark's story. Are we not looking for wholeness, and well-being? Do we not struggle in the cacophony of noise in this world to hear God over all that blocks out his voice? Where are we to turn to find that gift? We turn away from useless chatter to take into our souls what is real and lasting; God's hope for us. We need to recognize that sometimes wholeness and healing are found not in changing our physical status in the present moment, but in the promise that completeness is being given on deeper levels. St. Augustine reminds us that since he is the Word, every action Jesus has taken must be read symbolically, i.e. in layers of meaning.

For all the difficulties of living in this age with Covid-19, it is undeniable that much has occurred to improve life. Diseases that only a few decades ago could not be treated can now be cured, and other have been eradicated completely. We have new medicines are constantly becoming available. Even though from time to time truly unusual healing occurs, healing does not strike us immediately as miraculous as it may in fact be! Our hearing has become dulled. Mark's story invites us to open our ears and souls about our own need for healing, and about who can provide it.

Society has come to some extent to accept persons with disabilities and find ways to allow them to be productive and to lead meaningful lives among us. But have you ever wondered when you encounter someone with a challenge, that this could be you? Perhaps we should ask where in our own spiritual lives we might be disabled; deaf, mute, or closed off. Is there a part of me, of my spirit that is hindered in some wounded way?

What does it mean to be spiritually mute? Might it mean there are parts of us that find no voice to speak of vital things? Are there hopes and dreams that have come to be silenced by ordinary living? Are there disappointments and concerns that remain hidden due to our fear to mention them? It has been said that Americans can talk more readily about sex or death than failures. I read a story recently of a man who lost his job, but rather than tell his family he got up every morning, dressed for work, left his house, and returned in the evening for 6 months. Unable to share it with his spouse he remained mute and in bondage to his fear of failure. Perhaps we are fearful of expressing our doubts about our faith when seeking open conversation and support we might find healing and hope. Muteness of spirit is debilitating. Christ's grace and love invite us to leave fear behind and offer him all that is within us.

The condition of the man in St. Mark's account is not so far away as it may seem. We, too, may well be unable or unwilling to hear the words of God and others that could set us free. We may find that the help offered comes from people we would rather avoid, so we will not listen. It is

striking in this story that Jesus takes his saliva and places it the man's tongue—it is an ancient belief in the transference of power, but it is likely off-putting. It is a not too subtle reminder that God may well offer us healing in places we would not willingly seek it. We might all do well to ask what situations and people we most want to avoid. There may be grace lurking there.

If I may be allowed a personal reflection in a homily then let me tell you a brief story. My earliest memories are of waking up in the morning and finding blood on the pillowcase where I had my head. I was plagued by constant and persistent Mastoid infections as a child. This was long before ear tubes and new antibiotics. Over time those infections did damage; at first unnoticed, but slowly the effects came to light. Things like not catching words, needing the radio volume increased, and not hearing the sound of approaching traffic became regular. Then, my speech changed and words often were not discernible by others. Treatments and surgery followed, and finally off to the Wilkerson Speech and Hearing Clinic in Nashville. Let me say that I hated speech therapy; not merely disliked it but despised the whole business. It was a slow, frustrating, and emotionally painful process. I remember being unable to make “sh” sounds and in one session we worked simply on the word, shovel. I would become so angry. The therapist would leave the room and allow my anger to be expressed, but always came back refusing to give up or let me give up. It was as bad as I imagine having someone put saliva in my mouth, but sometimes healing happens in just that way, and I am convinced that those therapists were agents of God seeking to set me free. God brings His Kingdom into the world even now and here.

All of us have places in our spirits where we are deaf, mute, or blind; where we need healing and wholeness restored. And God, in Jesus Christ, seeks to do what we most need. Perhaps it will not be in ways we hoped or would prefer. Perhaps the agents of our healing will be through people who hardly seem the type. People rejected our Lord for the same reasons. But He keeps on offering and standing with us until we are ready to be healed. It may be in a word, a touch, a Sacrament, an open mind, or a listening ear and heart. And when we are willing the one who is a sign of the Kingdom will make us whole again. Amen+