

“A Healing Word”
Mark 7:31-37

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September 6, 2009

I love the story in scripture this morning. It clearly displays God’s fidelity toward us. The story announces that God’s healing power is alive and active. The story proclaims that Jesus embodies God’s healing power. The story declares that God’s Kingdom reigns. But, what I love the most about this story is that it invites us to know God’s healing power in our own lives.

The story is very concrete. Jesus goes to the region of Tyre by the way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee in the region of Decapolis. Apparently this does not make any sense according to geography, but that doesn’t really matter. What matters is the knowledge that Jesus goes on a journey to teach people about God’s healing power. Jesus goes on a journey to teach people about God’s presence – God’s truth. The journey may not be logical, but the lack of logic could be the point. One thing I’ve learned in all my years as a spiritual director is that God’s way is not logical or rational. Rather, it is about wisdom and love.

In Tyre people bring a deaf man who has an impediment in his speech to Jesus for healing. Jesus takes him aside, away from the crowd, and puts his fingers in his ears, spits and touches the man’s tongue. Then, while looking up to heaven, he says in Aramaic “Ephphatha,” which means: “be opened.” Immediately the man’s ears were opened and his tongue was released and he spoke plainly.

I have often wondered about the tone of Jesus’ voice when he said “Ephphatha.” Did he say it forcefully? Did he say it angrily? Did he say it lovingly? Did he say it mystically? What is clear is that he said it in a way that God’s healing power worked through him. With his fingers and his spit and his divine connection with The Holy, the man was cured. It is a remarkable image.

What’s so important for us to understand is the miracle isn’t just a nice story about something that happened 2000 years ago. We are told that the man and those around him zealously proclaimed to others the wonder of the miracle. Through this we are to understand that Jesus’ power – Jesus’ ability to open people to God’s healing power is there for each of us. Jesus speaks to us as much as he speaks to the deaf man. “Ephphatha.” “Be Open.” This word is for all of us.

It is delightful to experience the inner warmth of being opened to God’s healing love. The experience of God’s presence-with-us might not be as powerful as being deaf and now being able to hear, but it is a subtle hearing – an inner hearing that changes our hearts and our way of seeing and understanding what is important in life. As people of

faith we are invited to understand a different way of hearing. This way of hearing teaches us God's wisdom and truth.

Howard Thurman's prayer that we prayed this morning expresses the contrast between relying on human consciousness and seeking God's sacred healing. Instead of darkness, God offers light. Instead of fear, courage; instead of despair, hope; instead of turmoil, peace; instead of sorrow, joy; instead of weakness, strength; instead of confusion, wisdom; instead of sin, forgiveness; instead hate; love. These are the healing qualities of God's way. When we encounter them, embrace them and unite with them our ears are opened and we hear God's message of inner healing.

Sometimes coming to church can help us enter into this way of knowing. A few weeks ago Bob and I went to upstate New York to the Chautauqua Institute. Chautauqua is a wonderful old protestant community, a kind of summer camp for adults, where visiting theologians and ministers preach every day. Operas and symphonies are performed at night and every other kind of intellectual, spiritual and artistic opportunity can be experienced sometime during the week. Every Sunday night they hold a hymn sing at 8 p.m. Ever since I was a child I have loved hymn sings so I was eager to arrive in time to attend the one offered.

By the time we left for Chautauqua in late August, I was weary. This has been a lovely summer but also a summer of listening to and encouraging young 20 year olds. Between our own children and my nieces and nephews all of whom are between the ages of 25 and 19, Bob and I have listened to and encouraged all kind of young adult decisions – one is getting married and finishing graduate school; one is starting college and wishes her mom was alive to encourage her; two graduated from college and are looking for work; one is starting junior year in college and earnestly seeking adulthood; one is writing a proposal for a PhD. There were apartment issues to address, wedding plans to discuss, travel issues to resolve.

When Bob and I settled down in an old wooden bench in the 5000 seat Amphitheater for the hymn sing I was eager to embrace God's healing presence. I just knew that being among so many followers of Christ would heal my weary soul. I was right. By the time we got to "There is a Balm in Gilead" I felt like myself again. The old familiar hymns, the soothing words, the glorious voices of thousands of people singing gave me strength. The anxieties of the summer were washed away. It was time to rest in God's light.

Like a worship service, scripture also offers us moments of sacred healing. That is why the great Christian teachers throughout the centuries have encouraged people to begin their day by reading scripture. The Individual and Family Daily Devotional in the *Book of Common Prayer* begins with the words of Psalm 51:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,

And do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
And sustain in me a willing spirit.

Praying these words each morning reminds us that God is a part of our daily life and God's healing spirit dwells with us.

As people of faith in the 21st century we can be confident that God's healing spirit dwells among us. The current slogan for the UCC is: "God is still speaking." Another slogan could be: "God is still healing."

I was talking with a man the other day that I've known for many years. He has a hard life due a sickness that cannot be healed. Regardless of his condition he has sought to know God's love and healing energy. He has discovered that God dwells with him even in his sickness. He explained to me that every now and then he sees an image of the face of God that is so filled with love and understanding that it gives him the courage and strength to keep on living. The image helps to heal his weary struggle with life. Looking at me with radiant eyes, he said I'm here to tell you that God's alive and active. Or, God is still healing.

Jesus came to the man who was deaf and said: "Be Open." Jesus comes to us, unplugs our ears and says: "Be open to my healing presence and know that God is with you."

As we gather around the communion table may we know that the God of love and healing dwells with us. Amen.

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