

September 9, 2012

Scripture Lessons Psalm 146, p. 719

Mark 7: 31-37

Sermon What?

One day when I was riding back in Amish and Mennonite country back in Pennsylvania with church people, I think we were headed to a church dinner someplace, I was sort of feeling in a goofy mood, and I decided to give 80 year old Ethel a little bit of a hard time. The good thing about the story is that Ethel had a great sense of humor, so as I spotted a sign that read 'Deaf Mennonite Church' I whispered these words in Ethel's ear – Deaf Mennonite Church. And how did Ethel respond? What? And of course I continued to play the game a couple more times a little bit louder each time. I said Deaf Mennonite Church and she said What? Again and again. About that time she got the joke and almost smacked me in the ear.

Now I am telling you this story because not to be any way insensitive because we have a lot of hard of hearing folks in the congregation, but to bring home the point of today's gospel from Mark's gospel. About how deaf each of us can be when it comes to hearing, when it comes to speaking, and finally, when it comes to sharing God's love with those around us in the world. And right on the heels of the healing story just before this one, in today's gospel lesson from Mark's comes another story, the story of the man who could not hear or speak properly. As we know one can go hand in hand with the other for if a person has not been able to hear for a long time in life that can affect the way a person's speech is developed. A case in point is Helen Keller who could neither hear, nor speak, nor see. It is a wonderful story of her overcoming those handicaps in life.

This story has a completely different take than the story before it on healing however. Instead of Gentile territory in this story we are back amongst Jewish people. Instead of reluctance on the part of Jesus to heal in the story Jesus acts very quickly sort of matter of fact. And instead of just speaking one word as he did in the previous story, Jesus you will notice, uses various techniques in the process of healing. He's earthy, he's personal. He works very hard at the healing, he uses spittle as he does other places in the gospel and he speaks in Aramaic word, and what happens, both hearing and speech were immediately restored.

As in other places in the gospel the one healed is asked not to tell others, but for someone like Jesus, this seems to be a strange thing to say for someone who wants to get the word of the gospel out. The commentaries refer to this

phenomenon as the gospel secret. And sometimes account for it by assuming that Jesus is not ready to tip his hand so to speak. And so he asks people 'don't tell others what I have done'.

I think I have a little bit more practical theory – and my theory is that Jesus was using reverse psychology in a lot of these situations. Because what happens the minute you tell someone not to tell something. They immediately start telling the secret. Besides how long could you possibly keep something like this a secret in your life anyway? For a person who has not been able to hear or speak for a good portion of their life.

Beyond the whole physical healing aspect of this gospel writers often use these events to demonstrate a spiritual point, and I think in this case the spiritual point is might be unlike the spiritual leaders and ultra-religious people of Jesus' day and faith who are spiritually deaf to his message and to verbalize his message to the world. Common people, common people like this person healed, are able to hear Jesus' message of love, forgiveness and kindness to others and somehow share that with the whole world around them.

What the passage just hearing and speaking the gospel message, is only about half the story because our faith is not just for us, and it is not just for the inside of this building around us. Ours instead as you well know is an active faith, our faith is a put your money where your mouth is faith. Our faith is a faith that doesn't stand for just talking thing to death, or half measures, but one that works together to get things done.

That is my belief about you, that is my belief about church, and that is why I think that the very nature of the healing in this story is so important. I think that the gospels demonstrate how important that Jesus and his followers considered active listening before speaking to be a part of our Christian faith. Maybe as I did with Mandy, I want to define terms here, instead of calling this term active listening, I am going to call it active hearing. Because I believe a lot of people in our day do an awful lot of listening without really hearing. Because hearing is work, hearing understands, hearing evokes action.

How often for example, do we give or are we given undivided attention in a conversation? Folks that live together as husband and wife, or other folks in the house, how often do you give undivided attention to the person speaking? Often times we are in the process of thinking of the next thing we are going to say, or we are thinking about our cell phone or our computer, or keeping one ear on the radio or TV, while they are speaking. And we only hear about half the conversation and

so in doing we communicate to that speaker what they have to say is completely unimportant to what we are doing at that time.

And likewise the same scenario, causes misunderstanding, and it causes friction and it causes conflict in the larger society around us. As we do a lot of time what I call shooting past each other in other words, sending out polarizing points of view, in religion, in politics, and in the media, to the point where almost nothing gets done. Cases in point a number of months ago, the congress tried to pass a budget, the health care debate, or the present talking points on both sides of this political season where we find ourselves.

After Jesus forbids the healed man to speak of his healing and the healed man speaks anyway, the reaction in this case is a remarkably positive reaction. The people say to Jesus, He has done all things well. Even makes the deaf to hear, and the mute to speak. And so my wish today and my prayer is that may be true of us, that we encourage the hearing, encourage the speaking and finally as we encourage the active hearing and sharing of the love of God in Jesus all around the hurting world in which we find ourselves.

Together we say, Amen.