

Many of us have been traveling during this summer season, whether to far flung places or to familiar getaways nearer at hand. One of the best things about travel, to my mind, is that we almost always learn something when we travel, whether about history, culture, geography, nature, or other people. Mark Twain famously wrote, ““Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.” I'd have to agree; traveling and encountering those different from ourselves is certainly a challenge to some of our assumptions about those outside of our usual sphere. Jesus is having this very kind of travel experience in our Gospel lesson today. He is doing something that was not at all typical of Jews at His time; He is leaving the familiar and approved culture of Palestine and venturing out into the Gentile world around Him, first into Phoenicia, then into the Decapolis; both areas filled with people considered ritually and religiously unclean and profane by Jesus' peers. He is encountering those different from Himself and His disciples, interacting with them, and being *changed* by those encounters, as are the recipients of His attention. As we see God do so often in Christ, God is surprising us. That is surprise both over the traditional boundaries which Jesus is breaking, geographically and culturally, but *also* we are surprised in the *kind* of encounters Jesus has in these travel destinations.

We actually have two stories of Jesus this morning in our text, two healings, and each healing contains surprises. The first healing begins with Jesus trying to find some privacy and being unable to find it. He was hoping for some downtime, but he didn't get it. “He could not escape notice,” we read in the first verses of our gospel lesson. Even in the 1<sup>st</sup> C, fame cost people their privacy. In this instance, it is a mother who approaches Jesus, a mother with a child who is ill. She immediately and quite naturally has our sympathy. Being as Jesus has left Palestine behind, this mother is *not* a Jew, but a Gentile, which puts her outside of the initial focus of Jesus' ministry. Nevertheless, we would expect Jesus to have compassion for her and her daughter, so his response to her surprises us, takes us aback. It may be that she interrupted him during a meal, since he uses the analogy of a meal in his answer to her. In response to her plea for help, he tells her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs”---which appears to have been a 1<sup>st</sup> C. Jewish proverb. What he is

expressing, in essence, seems to be--“I am concerned first of all for Jewish people; they are like children gathered around the meal table, and the Gentiles are more like dogs waiting under the table for the scraps. I must feed the children before the dogs are fed. Jews before Gentiles.” Now, this seems like a strange response on Jesus’ part, a response with attitude. According to my son, one of his high school teachers some years back always liked to tell his classes, “I can dish out attitude, but I won’t take any from you.” Rightly or wrongly, this teacher felt that they could display attitude, but that their students should not. Jesus takes a different approach than my son’s former teacher. Jesus displays some attitude, definitely, but he is prepared, maybe even pleased, to receive some attitude *back* in return. Because this Gentile mother, rather than being crushed or tongue-tied by Jesus’ unexpected response, like we might have been, comes back with a snappy retort—“Sir, even the dogs eat the crumbs the children let fall.” Her comeback embodies humility, feistiness and wit all at once, and Jesus is obviously delighted with her. He tells her, “For saying that you may go---your daughter is healed.” And so she was. Maybe Jesus was intentionally goading this mother, to bring out the best in her. Maybe he wanted her to show a little spunk. We can’t know that, but we can know that Jesus was not put off by her stubborn refusal to just lay down and give up but was glad of her persistence and humor.

The second miracle also has a surprising element, in that Jesus gets *messy* in this one. Having moved on from Phoenicia into the Decapolis, still a Gentile region outside of Palestine, He is asked to heal a man who can neither hear nor speak. And He does, but in a way that surprises us. I think we might expect him to speak a word of healing, perhaps to touch the man on the shoulder with a compassionate clasp, but I don’t think we expect spit to enter into the healing. After all, Jesus just previously healed the daughter of this Phoenician mother without ever *even seeing* the daughter---a kind of long-distance healing, you might say. Wouldn’t it be great, if when we were sick, we could just call up the doctor and he or she could think healing thoughts in our direction and we could get better without ever leaving the house? That’s ideal healing, neat and convenient. That’s how Jesus healed the daughter. Yet, in contrast, he becomes very personally and physically involved in this healing we have before us now. He puts his fingers in the man’s ears. Doesn’t he know you’re not supposed to put anything smaller than your elbow into your ear canals? What is he thinking? Next, Jesus spits on his fingers and touches the man’s tongue with them. This is getting a little sloppy and personal, wouldn’t you say? He then utters a prayer:

“ephphatha,” which means “be opened,” and sure enough, the man is able to hear and speak plainly. The needed healing has again occurred, but in a very different manner than the prior healing.

One of the fascinating things about this difference in healing methods, is that it teaches us that different kinds of brokenness require different kinds of healing responses. God meets us where we are with what we need. God doesn’t respond to us in a “one size fits all” kind of way. And this is good news for us, because our real-life experience teaches us that we *don’t* all need the same type of healing. Grief is a different kind of brokenness than battling cancer which is different than a relationship in trouble and so on. “One size fits all” rarely works out well in clothing, and it definitely wouldn’t work well in healing. Each of us is so unique in how we respond to drugs or surgery or therapy. The best doctors and therapists are those who can tailor the treatment to the individual. That’s a great gift for a healer to have, and we all want doctors like that for ourselves. God, more than anyone, understands the unique quality of each individual, having made us that way. God, more than anyone, responds to us in our individual and unique needs, including our needs for healing. We learn that in these two healing miracles, in which each one in need receives exactly the healing they need most.

I’d like us to also think on the prayer Jesus says for this man: “ephphathta, be opened.” *Be opened*. That could be said to be a unifying theme of these two miracle healings, couldn’t it? Jesus is open to moving past boundaries that others considered closed. He is open to leaving his comfort zone and interacting with people who do not share his beliefs, who may be viewed as enemies by some, and who are troubled and needy. He is open to engage with these people; to converse with wit with a desperate mother; to touch and spit on a man who cannot hear or speak. Jesus is open to new experiences and open to where God leads him. Even if that means pushing beyond a comfort zone. Quite obviously we might ask ourselves if we model that same openness. We live in a polarized, divisive culture, which tends to result in a naturally defensive posture. We may be closed off to many around us, feeling it’s a necessary technique for survival in an overwhelming and demanding world. Maybe so and yet...God calls us to be open to people and places where we might not feel the most comfortable. God calls us to be open beyond our comfort zones.

Finally, we learn something else from these stories; we discover that God wants us to discover our voices and use them. In the first miracle of healing, Jesus praises the woman for finding her voice, for speaking up, for

having a comeback. In the second miracle of healing, Jesus literally gives someone his voice, gives a man the gift of being able to speak plainly. So, in each instance, the one healed finds their voice.

There are some intriguing implications to this. Because how many of us associate faith with being quiet, accepting, maybe even passive at times? And doesn't our faith often feel very private, very internal, something known only to us and God? Our gospel stories today are a good reminder that faith is not a passive experience, but rather involves some spunk and some willingness to speak out. God wants us to discover our voice, to put our faith into words and action.

This can be a challenge for us, for those who like me grew up in a culture that encouraged quiet, inoffensive religiosity. I know I learned as a child that you don't say much about money, politics or religion. For many of us, it's quite difficult to speak out or act out for the sake of our faith. We might be tempted to blame this on our general Scandinavian –type background, but couldn't we also find inspiration within that background? I'm thinking that the Finns have a word that embodies some of this feisty faith quality, the quality we see in the Phoenician woman, and the word is "sisu", isn't it? Doesn't "sisu" mean something like grit, determination, pluck? God might be encouraging us today to incorporate a bit of "sisu" into our faith, whether or not we have Finnish blood.

JOYFUL's beautiful music this morning is a way those singing find their voice, isn't it? And our inspiring director, Patti, always emphasizes that we are sharing a Gospel message through our music, through our voices raised in song. As *all of us* sing hymns to our Lord, we are finding our voice. As we listen and converse with others, perhaps outside of our comfort zones, we are finding our voice. As we share that word of compassion or encouragement, we find our voice. Perhaps we might want to consider that God brings us the healing we need, partly so we may be open to others, and we may find our voice and use it-- for Christ's sake and for the good of our neighbor. Amen.