



Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 5th, 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23](#)

[James 2:1-10, \[11-13\], 14-17](#)

[Mark 7:24-37](#)

Good morning! Good morning, and God's blessings! On this beautiful day, in the midst of this beautiful Labor Day weekend, we are grateful. Thank you, God, for such beauty in this world, for the joy of days like these. Before we dive deeply into the word of God, let us pause to remember today all those who work, toil, sweat, strain, and give of themselves in labor.

Almighty God, you have so linked our lives one with another that all we do affects, for good or ill, all other lives: So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; and, as we seek a proper return for our own labor, make us mindful of the rightful aspirations of other workers, and around our concern for those who are out of work; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The words we heard today from the book of Proverbs, that collection of wise sayings and counsel for living, are important for us to remember – at all times, and especially on this Labor Day weekend, and especially in times such as we live in today where there is so much agitated strife. Remember these words from Proverbs:

The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.

Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate;

for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

Today's scriptures put us face to face with God's calling for us to treat one another with equal dignity because all are God's beloved creations and made in God's image. And today's scriptures put us face to face with our own falling so short of God's calling, as we descend so easily into favoritism and tribalism and social, ethnic, and economic biases that twist us away from treating one another with equal dignity.

Look at how James writes strong words of correction to people in the early church communities to which he writes. Look at how directly he speaks to the problem that was arising, even then, among the early followers of Jesus. There is a problem of favoritism – of giving special, privileged position to certain people in the community because they had more wealth, more status, more fame. This arose even in the earliest days of the Church. You might remember that in the book of Acts, the early church community that gathered Jewish believers from all sorts of backgrounds of the places they have lives and worked in the Roman Empire, this community immediately experienced a division of favoritism arising among them. There is this beautiful picture in Acts of the first Christians gathering together, selling their possessions, and sharing everything in common so that all had what they needed. But favoritism arose, so that Jewish believers who came from areas that seemed more fully and truly Jewish, that kept more closely to all the cultural traditions, took and received more shares of the common goods than the Jewish believers who had lived and worked among Gentiles and spoke and acted more like those Gentiles. This became a real problem, quickly – and the early church leaders found people who would justly oversee and handle distribution of shared goods, who would make sure that

no one was being neglected and no one was being given too much indulgence or privilege. These were the first deacons of the church.

James is still finding the same kind of problem in the communities he is confronting. And he says very directly, “My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” My brothers and sisters, do your actions show what you really believe in, more than what you say you believe in and what we claim to be about?

James is such a wonderful book of the bible. It is a kind of “Show Me” book. Martin Luther didn’t like the book much, because it presented a picture that was different than what he wanted to emphasize, that was so important to him and had saved his own soul. For Martin Luther, the emphasis on works and deeds in the medieval Roman Catholic world had buried the deeper truth of the Gospel, that God’s grace alone could save and transform us, and that we are saved by faith alone. So, since James said that “faith without works is dead,” Martin Luther referred to James as “the epistle of straw.” But Martin Luther missed the deeper point of James, which is that true faith transforms and shifts our ways of thinking and acting – and that if our ways of thinking and acting haven’t changed, then our faith is at best shallow and at worst a lie we are telling ourselves while letting ourselves escape from God’s work of transformation within us. We are known by how we live.

James unpacks the whole problem of privilege and favoritism deeply. You see two people come in the room – one dressed in fine clothes of whatever style suits your own people, and one dressed in dirty clothes. Which are you more likely to approach first, to offer a place and some service first? How are you likely to speak differently to each of them? How differently might you even say the same words to each of them, “What can I do for you?” The moment we do this, we have made distinctions – no, we are acting on distinctions we have already made and assumed as correct. And so, we have put our faith not in God but in mammon, in money and position and power. James challenges this: “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him... You will do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Even more strongly, he says, “Judgment shall be without mercy to anyone who has no mercy; but mercy triumphs over judgment.”

It is out of this – this focus on how we treat each other, both inside and outside the fellowship of faith – that James challenges our comfortable idea that we have faith and therefore have enough for ourselves. Salvation, friends, is day by day as we accept God’s grace, as we invite God’s challenging, life-transforming love to change us, as we live by pouring out around us the flowing power of God’s love among others no matter who they are, as we offer ourselves fully and bother to get dirty in helping others. “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” If my actions don’t show it, my faith hasn’t really taken hold of me. The same is true for each one of you, each of us.

There is serious challenge in this region, in terms of how we care for one another in a culture overly shaped by a mutated frontierism that calls for everybody to look out for themselves and themselves alone. There is serious mutation of the Gospel around us whenever we hear that people should “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.” The heart of the Gospel is a call to love. And that call demands that we care for, support, and defend one another and the people around us as children of God deserving of equal dignity.

Jesus found such a challenge as he traveled around the country in the Middle East where he was born and raised, where he lived and worked and taught. The two healing stories we have today from Mark’s Gospel occur when Jesus was out among the “heathen,” the Gentiles, outside the boundaries and territory of his own

fellow Jewish people – with his disciples along with him for the journey. Tyre and Sidon were Mediterranean coastal cities in Phoenecia, what is Lebanon today, a good space northeast of the Sea of Galilee. He and the disciples were truly outside their own usual cultural and ethnic space. And here is one of the places where we have these remarkable healings by Jesus of Gentile people.

These two healings are very, very different from each other, but together they speak volumes about the wideness and broadness of God’s generous love, mercy, and life-giving, life-restoring desire for all – and about how Jesus blasts right through the hidden mutated scripts that people tend to live by and that shape how they approach and treat each other.

Think about the kinds of scripts people then had for each other. We are most familiar from scripture with the ways Jewish people thought about Samaritans, and Gentiles, and Romans. But there were other scripts in people’s minds as well – how Phoenecians and Samaritans and Romans thought about Jews and about each other. Prejudice, bias, stereotyping, forms of presumptions about people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds – none of these are new things to the human race, none of these are unique to any empire or nation even now. They are besetting sins of humanity, and they distort our seeing one another with true dignity as children of God who bear God’s image.

So, it can be troubling as we read what Jesus said and did with the Syro-Phoenecian woman and with the Gentile deaf-and-mute man from the region. What in the world was Jesus thinking, saying such a thing to this woman pleading for healing for her daughter? “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Wasn’t this a cruel, demeaning thing to say? And what about the deaf-and-mute man? Jesus at least takes him aside, but then he pokes his fingers in his ears, spits – SPITS! – and touches his tongue. Wasn’t spitting in the ancient world – and around the world today – a sign of disrespect, of disgust? Other occurrences of spitting in the bible have to do with defilement (if an unclean person spits on you), and with disdain (Job feels that people are spitting at him in revulsion, and the soldiers and mockers spit on Jesus when he was arrested and condemned to die).

It’s important to note that these stories of healing in Mark come right after Jesus has gone head to head with religious leaders who are repulsed by the way his disciples were eating without washing their hands first, and he points to the deeper defilement of the heart and soul, saying that it is what comes out of a person in words and actions that truly defiles.

Even with those words ringing in their ears, Jesus’ disciples come face to face with their own prejudices operating just beneath the surface. Here in Tyre and Sidon, a woman approaches Jesus with a plea for healing for her daughter. She is of Syro-Phoenecian descent. And Jesus is staying most likely in a Jewish household with his disciples. Immediately, there is the tension in the air. “What is she doing here?” is the unspoken sense in the house. And she still comes forward boldly and pleads from her heart for her daughter to be healed. Jesus responds with those jarring words that essentially compares her to a dog, unworthy of the food that belongs to the children.

Some people think Jesus, as the omniscient Son of God, was testing her with these words to see how she would respond. That seems just a bit “off” to me – it can look like Jesus is being manipulative, even knowing that he would eventually heal her daughter anyway. Other folks think that Jesus, God-with-us yet fully human, was speaking out the cultural scripts in which he had been shaped, maybe just having a bad day but also caught up in the worldviews in which he had been raised until this woman helped open new doors for him. Maybe, there might be something there – but I think this also falls short and does injustice to Jesus by presuming that he was so trapped by his own culture’s mindsets.

I wonder if Jesus was actually choosing to say aloud what was going on under the surface in this meeting of people from different cultural and ethnic worlds. I wonder if Jesus was daring to put into words, put right on center stage, the prejudicial presumptions that everyone – his disciples, the host, the woman – was sensing but not naming. And by naming it aloud, Jesus forced it into consciousness for everyone and held up the mirror for everyone to see what kind of hidden forces were operating among them.

In a way, Jesus did the same thing with the deaf-and-mute man – graciously pulling him away from the crowd, but then for him and his disciples giving a sign that the man (and his disciples) could clearly understand of the disrespect and fearful revulsion that he lived with and endured every day of his life as a disabled person. He saw and felt the spit. The disciples saw it, too. And so, the hidden script was raised to the surface for them to face.

In both cases, Jesus faced the script with them all, together. He named the binding power of the hidden script by holding up the mirror of it for all in the small group to see. Jesus says aloud and acts out visibly the language of defilement, shame, and disgust that is under the surface as the social script for Jews regarding Gentiles and for the clean regarding the unclean. Living demonstration, “Let’s get this out in the open,” “Let’s just put this out there – this has got to be made public, because this has to be part of the healing.” And then he continued forward, treating each person with dignity that was distinct for each of them.

A deeper healing is going on here in these stories, as Jesus contends with an evil that lurks deeper beneath the surface. Yes, the woman’s daughter is healed – without ever seeing or meeting Jesus. Yes, the man’s hearing and speech are restored. But there is a deeper healing as well. Jesus has named and enacted a reality that this woman and this man each have lived with for so much of their lives, and dared to bring it to the surface so that they and others can choose to respond differently.

When we seek care for others, it is not only to alleviate them and meet their needs of the moment. True, deep care as we find in Jesus also touches some of the deeper places of wounding and pain in people’s lives – the things that are wounds and pains from the cultures and societies in which we move and which have shaped how we treat one another. The words Jesus spoke to the deaf-and-mute man, “Be opened, Ephphatha, Be opened,” are words for all who were there at that moment of healing – and they went deep, so that the man could speak of what he had experienced, and so others could truly hear and then speak as well.

Friends, don’t be afraid to speak aloud what is going on under the surface. It may be that this is one of the most important pathways toward healing. When we know the truth, when we face the truth – even those ugly truths about ourselves and our culture and world – then the truth can set us free.

Be opened. Ephphatha. Be opened. Let hearing and speech come to you, let your minds be stilled. And do not be afraid to open the doors of truth for others. God’s river of healing runs deep.

Amen.