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The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
September 8, 2024

Today's gospel contained 2 stories, one about a mother who comes to Jesus asking for help and one about the healing of a man who is deaf.

Both stories, in their own way, contain elements that are disturbing. In the first, Jesus is unkind, to put it mildly, to a woman asking for help; and the second story contains a cultural implication that is demeaning about people who are deaf.

I want to address both stories, but first I want to talk about a question underlying them, a question that suggests a take away for what these stories can mean for us and for our lives, and the anxiety and challenges and pain that we all face

The question is: How fully do we want to give ourselves to living the Way of Love that Christ teaches?

Jesus frequently says that anyone who wants to follow him has to give up everything, to lose themselves, let go of who they think they are.

So how much are we willing to lose, to let go of to live the Way of Love?

Another way to put this question is How much do we want to evolve? As an individual human being, or as a species?

Because clearly we need to do that. The state of affairs in which we all collectively find ourselves points to the dire need of humans to become more conscious, more loving of one another, more open to seeing every person with love, as we would see a newborn baby, precious and vulnerable. We are in need of feeling connected to one another, because the connection is the truth of us.

So that question is a golden thread to remember that runs through the fabric of these stories.

So I'm going to address the second story first, the story of the healing of a man who is deaf.

I couldn't resist addressing this because we are very blessed to have a beloved deaf community at St. Paul's, and just 2 Sundays ago, we celebrated the feast of Thomas Gallaudet and Henry Winter Syle, 2 Episcopal priests from the 1800's, one hearing, one deaf, both of whom served and supported the deaf community. Also during that celebration we gave a blessing to our deaf community at our 9 am service.

So I didn't want to miss this opportunity to name that many healing stories in scripture, like this one, imply that someone who is physically deaf needs to be fixed. That to hear is "right" and "normal," and to not hear is to be less than whole.

It surprises people to know that in deaf culture in America today, deafness is viewed positively, with pride as a unique and beautiful culture and as a particular and beautiful expression of being human.

In the first century setting of the gospel, there were outright beliefs that people who were physically deaf or physically diverse in any way, were being punished by God for some sin.

These sort of beliefs are widespread across time, in our human conditioning. Sometimes blatant, but more often subtle and unseen. These subtle beliefs, conscious or unconscious, diminish the joy and our power to see all people as God sees them, precious, beloved, perfect.

In the realm of God, in the realm of love, no child, no person needs to be ashamed of who they are, how they were created, what particular diverse expression of God they bring to earth.

In asking ourselves: how fully do we want to live in the Way of Love, we might ask if we are willing to notice any subtle or blatant negative ways we sometimes view others because of how they look or some manner of diversity? To catch ourselves in it, to contemplate it, to hold ourselves accountable? And even the subtle ways we view *ourselves*, judging ourselves for who we are, how we look, how we were created.

We might pray to see as God sees us.

Paddy Ladd, a British scholar and author, who is deaf, said of deaf culture

“...We celebrate our proud history, our arts, and our cultures... we celebrate our survival...we remember that many of us and our ancestors have suffered at the hands of those who believe we should not be here. We are here to remember them...to pledge...to fight to end that oppression now for all the world’s Deaf children and the others still to come.”

We can apply Paddy’s sentiment to ourselves to notice and hold ourselves accountable for all manner of oppressive thoughts about others that may hold our hearts captive.

In the other story in today’s gospel, a woman asks Jesus to heal her daughter.

Jesus dismissively responds that “it’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

This is shocking coming from Jesus. If you didn’t catch the gist, by children he is referring to the Jews as the children of God and by dogs he is referring to her.

He is telling this desperate mother that his mission is for the Jews alone. We are quite right to feel disturbed and shocked by these insulting words from Jesus.

But maybe this disturbance and shock serves a purpose, cracking us open and awakening our heart’s attention.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that in the passage in Mark just before this one, which we heard last Sunday, Jesus is warning about hypocrisy. Quoting Isaiah, he says

*people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me*

And in this passage, we see hypocrisy not in Jesus' followers or in others, but In Jesus himself. We are allowed to see Jesus' bare humanity. What a teaching for us.

The woman, made courageous perhaps by her love for her child, responds prophetically to his lapse of compassion by rebuking him,

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” and Jesus snaps back into clarity, into the divinity in his heart. He says her daughter is already healed. We see his humanity and his divinity all in the space of seconds. This woman has opened him up.

Isn't it ironic that when Jesus next pronounces the healing of the deaf man, he says, “Be opened.”

This is the healing we all need. Not to be “fixed” from the diverse expression of God that we are, not to belong to one exclusive group over another, not to be a picture of so-called perfection like we see in the glossy pages of advertising, non-reality.

But to be open and see for ourselves the belovedness of all, including ourselves.

And if Jesus, in his humanity can lose sight of that belovedness, so can we. So take heart, have courage. We can be deeply affected by the humility of the teacher to let his vulnerability be seen. The profound encouragement here is to be humble enough, brave enough to look for oppressive judgment in ourselves, to see it, to admit it, and to snap back into clarity, to call ourselves back from our mistakes, to open our hearts and minds and eyes to the places of our own hypocrisy in ourselves. And to call ourselves back to remember the divine in our hearts.

How fully do we want to live the Way of Love that Christ teaches?

We are capable of this, we have the gifts already to do this. And we have the deep compassion and understanding of God, of Jesus Christ, who experienced humanity with us, coming to us in the weeds of human fallibility and confusion to support us in using our freedom of choice to choose love.

We have the full support of grace.

May we all choose the humility and courage to be opened, to be radically changed, to let our souls evolve, to walk in the power, and the joy, of Love.