

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Lawrence, Kansas  
Sermon for September 6, 2009  
Proper 18b ~ James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17, Mark 7:24-37  
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Today's Gospel finds Jesus in Gentile territory. He first encounters a Syrophonecian woman who pleads with him to heal her daughter, who is possessed by a demon. Next he encounters a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment. They are not his people. Why is he there and why would he heal people like them?

Behind this story is the question of whether Jesus' mission was consciously just to the Jews or intentionally extended to the Gentiles. Whether a definitive answer can be given in terms of scholarship, at least the biblical record is clear. Jesus never turned away anyone, Jew or Gentile, who sought his help. The kingdom he was proclaiming was above all an inclusive realm of grace, open to everyone.

In the early Church, the question shifted to whether one had to become a Jew first before becoming a Christian. Paul's more inclusive way prevailed over the more exclusive approach of Peter. The grace of God was offered freely, without the need for circumcision or a particular religious pedigree.

Today, this question has emerged in yet another way. It comes to us transformed by the growing awareness that Christendom as we have known it in the West no longer is (and perhaps never was) the dominant religion in the world, and by the growing visibility of the great diversity and vitality of the many other religious and spiritual traditions in the world. For me at least, the question is no longer how to make the world Christian. The new emerging question is: What does it mean to be a Christian in the world?

Think for a moment, those of you, who, at some point in your life, made the conscious decision to become a Christian. Did you not, after your conversion, look back and see that the grace of God had already been at work in your life? We call this "prevenient" grace. It is the grace that goes before, prepares the way, makes us ready to hear God's call to us.

Or those of you who grew up in a Christian home, who have always thought of yourself as a Christian - was not that grace present in your home, prior to your consciousness or understanding of it?

Whether converted or reared Christian from childhood, did it not happen like this: through a particular person or community, in the midst of a particular situation, through an experience of forgiveness, healing, gratitude, joy, love, even despair, something divine was at work; something to which you responded, with or without being able to name it as grace. And whether or not you responded or named it as such, this grace was there first, in fact, had to have been there first. The evidence is that what has happened is not of your doing.

An experience of grace that Christians in fact proclaim is offered by God to everyone, at all times and in all places. I would add, offered whether a person responds or not, or calls it the grace of God or not. Of course, that's what Christians call it. We call it grace and know it as grace when we experience or see it because we've seen it in Jesus of Nazareth.

Such a perspective, of course, has implications for how Christians might think about the Church and its mission. You've probably heard the saying, "The Church has God's mission in the world." What is important to note is the order: the Church first, then God's mission, in the world. A wise person turns that saying around to say instead: "God's mission in the world has a Church."

As does the *Christian* who believes that given the broken and inhumane state of the world, it's only by way of a love that is willing to serve and even suffer that the world will be made whole.

Before she met Jesus, the Syrophoenician woman knew her worth. Call it by the grace of God, call it by whatever you want, at least what she knew was a reality for her. The man who was deaf and voiceless also knew. The only question facing them was: did Jesus know it? Because of the story, we know he did. The question for those of us who claim to follow him is: do we know this as well?

Within the Christian faith, we find the reasons and the resources to love our neighbors, whatever their religious or spiritual tradition may be. We are called by God to treat each and every one of our fellow human beings with respect and care, to actively work for their well-being, and to work with them for peace and justice in the world we all live in. I believe I am called to do this *whether or not* my neighbor is a Christian, *or even becomes* a Christian. Rather, I believe I am called to do this because I *am* a Christian.

The biblical scholar and preacher, Fred Craddock, tells the story of a missionary sent to India near the end of WW II. After many months the time came for a furlough back home. His church wired him the money for passage on a steamer. When he got to the port city, he discovered that a boatload of Jews had just been allowed to land temporarily. These were the days when European Jews were sailing all over the world looking for a place to live, and these particular Jews were staying in attics and warehouses and basements all over that port city.

It happened to be Christmas, and on Christmas morning, this missionary went to one of the attics where scores of Jews were staying. He walked in and said, "Merry Christmas."

The people looked at him as if he were crazy and responded, "We're Jews." "I know that," said the missionary, "What would you like for Christmas?" In utter amazement the Jews responded, "Why, we'd like pastries, good pastries like the ones we used to have in Germany."

So the missionary used the money for his ticket home to buy pastries for all the Jews he could find staying in the port. Of course, then he had to wire home asking for more money to book his passage back to the States. As you might expect, his superiors wired back asking what happened to the money they had already sent.

He wired that he had used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews. His superiors wired back, "Why did you do that? They don't even believe in Jesus." He wired back: "Yes, but *I* do."

This missionary was a doer of the word and not a hearer only! So are we when our ears are opened and our tongues are loosened, opening us to the hearing and the doing of the reconciling word entrusted to us.

In May of 1738, Peter Bohler, a Moravian missionary, said to Charles Wesley, "If I had a thousand tongues, I'd praise Christ with all of them." On the 21<sup>st</sup> of May, Charles' quest for such a faith was fulfilled. He was so stirred by those words of Peter Bohler that near the first anniversary of his conversion he wrote a hymn beginning, "Glory to God, and praise, and love." The seventh stanza recalls Peter Bohler's words: "O for a thousand tongues to sing my dear Redeemer's praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!"

Much of what passes for evangelical Christianity today – finding expression in overtly religious forms and concealed in secular forms – is aimed at closing ears, tying tongues, and excluding people. It sometimes seems to me that what is presented as good is in fact demonic. In contrast, we have the inclusive, healing, liberating ministry of our Redeemer, who not only talked about God's love, but did something about it. Each of us can only ask that he liberate us from whatever demons torment us, unstop our ears to hear him, and loosen our tongues to praise him – with our words and with our actions – so that we become an extension of the heart and hands of Incarnate One who came not to condemn, but to give life.