

23rd Sunday of the Year (B)

September 9, 2018

Isaiah 35:4-7

Psalm 146

James 2:1- 5:2

Mark 7:31-37

As we come into this world we are indeed dependent upon others for our very survival. Parents and siblings, grandparents and extended family, help to nurture us into a life that is loving and meaningful. As connected as we are to one another, it is interesting that communication with one another is no easy task. So often it is a real challenge.

Recently, I have been working with an individual and as we sat down for our third session together he told me it was his birthday. I wished him a Happy Birthday as he shared with me that he had not heard from anyone that day, no phone call, no text. He had been married twice, he has a daughter about to be married, he helped rear two children from his second marriage. Describing his second marriage, he said he did every thing for her and the boys, taking care of the home, cooking the meals, not even letting her come into the kitchen. And then, she asked for a divorce, finding him way too controlling. When I suggested that maybe he did not listen to her, he looked at me and wondered what I was talking about. “All I wanted was to take care of her and she walked away.” Communication is difficult for each of us but ever more difficult for those who have had a traumatic early life and for those who have endured trauma of combat.

The lessons from Isaiah and the gospel of Mark show us how God desires to enter into our human lives and bring all things into the loving order God intended. Jesus has come to open the door, to free us from any thing that would keep us from communicating and being present to one another. This event in the gospel lesson seems odd and strange, as a man unable to speak or hear is brought to Jesus. We know nothing about the man or the folks who brought him, yet without hesitation Jesus receives him and then takes him off away from the crowd. There is a series of complicated ritual actions, spitting, groaning, touching, and looking to heaven, as well as that word, *ephphatha* which (I understand) is not even good Aramaic. Some scripture scholars have suggested that Jesus’ earthiness, his folk medicine and primitive Aramaic, might simply be his way of gaining the man’s attention and trust. This event also fulfills the Isaiah prophecy in the first lesson, the messianic age comes with miraculous healings of the deaf and mute.

I think it might be helpful to spend some time with the details in this passage. In Mark’s gospel Jesus distinguishes between the crowd and his disciples. The crowd hears the teaching in parables, but Jesus does not take the crowd deeper. The disciples hear the teaching in parables, but Jesus also interprets the teaching in private. The greater crowd is not yet ready to come to know “the secret of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11, 34). And so, there is a special intimacy happening here. We know how very important are the ears for hearing and the tongue for speaking. Yet, the heart, the spiritual center of the person, is the real source of hearing and speaking. If the heart is open to its divine source, then the

person can truly hear and speak. If a person cannot hear or speak, it is because the heart is hard; consciousness is closed off from the divine source.

So here is Jesus putting his finger into the man's ears, and spitting. Jesus touches the man's tongue with his spit. Again, there is an intimacy here, something quite symbolic going. Jesus has his attention on something deeper and more important. First of all, touching the ears, he reverses the flow of attention, the struggle to decipher sounds coming from the outside. The man is invited to turn inward, pulling his consciousness toward the heart. Jesus is directing the man's attention into his spiritual center. The spit on Jesus' hand touches the man's tongue, that is, Jesus connects his Spirit with the man's spirit. Deep within now, this man and Jesus are communicating, hearing one another, listening to one another. Jesus looks to heaven. With Jesus the heavens have been permanently opened and Jesus is opening this man to God through his own openness to God. Finally, the primitive Aramaic *ephphatha* opens the ears, the tongue, and the heart.

I truly hope this is not too deep but that you can begin to see what might well be going on in this gospel passage. Making a connection, being in communication with the Lord Jesus, with God, and with one another is what this is all about. We can hear sounds and words, we can speak and groan even with words, but genuine communication happens only when the heart is engaged. We are spiritual beings as we strive to reach out to God, we are also spiritual beings as we strive to reach out, listen, and are present to one another. What is all important for each of us is to communicate from the heart.

Having pondered the sacred word and, in a few minutes, receiving the Eucharist, we begin another new new week. May we strive this week to live from the heart!

The great statesman and Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, once said, "The longest journey is the journey inward."