

# 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

## THE OPEN TABLE

*They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He [**She**] took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his [**her**] fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he [**she**] sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.*

Shelby and I have a relationship over which I am particularly pleased because our sharing of business and concerns, those having to do with the arrangements for our gatherings, our meals and hallowed services is leavened by laughter and theological jokes. For example, we conferred over the bulletin for today, its contents, the correct spelling of names and the number of them we needed to print. Once these matters had been settled our email exchange became just a touch giddy. I wrote to her that I would reproduce some 110 bulletins that people might share if we had more people than bulletins. I added that I would prefer to have more people than bulletins any day. And after all, I doubted Jesus passed out bulletins when he preached his sermon on the mount or to the 5000 and then again to the 4000 people he taught

and fed in the open plains. Shelby, quick witted and sure of the text for today, responded, “No bulletins for Jesus! Just a little bread and wine and good words, and sometimes some spit mixed with dirt.” I told her I was not at all certain that any of you would buy our attempts to heal your afflictions by spitting on you.

We conferred again yesterday when she called me a little after 9:00 just as I was about to call her. When my phone rang I knew instantly that it was Shelby because I knew she had foreseen what I had and wanted to discuss our plans for evading the rain for our annual fellowship to break bread at table. At nearly the very same moment we both said, ‘what do you want to do?’

I am convinced God has blessed us in these moments of light hearted banter to ease the seriousness of our call to a demanding and exacting ministry. If we require a model for fulfilling this call I say we need look no farther than Jesus, perfect and beautiful beyond compare, patient, compassionate and attentive to a fault . . . . And then we read today’s lection and we gulp in horror and revulsion to witness this Jesus who has entered foreign territory for respite from the challenges to his authority that the Pharisees and temple elders make. He has been rejected by members of his own family; he has a group of especially thick disciples to teach and he has

attended to every need for healing and feeding that has been presented to him. He wants nothing more than the restorative solitude that anonymity alone might provide. The text does say, “he did not want anyone to know he was there.”

Be that as it may, still we recoil in disappointment at the ugly, dismissive, and bigoted way Jesus responds to that poor woman, that Gentile, that Syrophoenician woman, when she begs and entreats him to cast the demon out of her daughter. My perfect, holy son of God, one with the Father and the Holy Ghost, the prince of Peace, the lily of the valley, that bright and morning star is not only imperfect but he is downright ugly. He exercises a privilege that honors the children of Israel but kicks at the cur, the dog beneath the table as though the prejudice is excusable and even warranted. He calls that woman’s child a dog. The insult extends to the one who gave her birth and so in the same breath Jesus has rebuked this pitiable woman. Her daughter’s suffering and the mother’s lament are beyond the proper limits within which Jesus thinks his ministry is ordained.

But the woman’s distress is real. Her daughter’s ordeal is acute. They are knotted together in the twist of pain. But Jesus spits at them the slur that sounds in the ancient world like slurs that deeply offend us today. He may as

well have called her the n word, or the b word. We know them all, these degrading, abusive words. The words we use to shut others out, the words we use to reduce their status and to divest them of dignity have this common base. In our daily tug and tear we call others animals!

But now Biblical hermeneutics kicks in and theological speculation leaps into action to rescue Jesus from what the gospel depicts. He did not mean it we will say; he had something, some supernatural truth in mind to reveal to the woman and to us that we have failed to notice from the surface of this encounter. Some larger narrative strategy has been deployed to cleverly amplify the perfect knowledge and love of Christ. Just one moment now and all will be made clear. Hold it! Here it comes. Watch closely . . . .

I am sorry but I do not buy any of that. Jesus is hard of heart in this episode. He is short of temper, blunt in speech, and off-putting in a way that fails utterly to appreciate this poor woman's plight. Jesus is rescued alright but the save comes from the one to whom he showed the back of his hand, or if you like, the cut of his tongue. In the agony of her concern for her daughter she is already convinced that Jesus is able to do what she asks and she will not leave until she has secured it. She is desperate. Her love for her daughter makes her so. Her response absorbs the slur and gives it back to Jesus as a

subversive rebuke of his own shortsightedness. He imagined that he had come into the world only for the sons and daughters of Israel, and that Tyre and its inhabitants were unworthy of Godly consideration.

Listen, Jesus sets a table for invited guests but the guests have name cards, they have pedigree and papers and marks of identification certifying that they are rightful heirs to the table's abundant store. But here's the thing, the crumbs beneath that table are still at the table and even if they have fallen to the ground there is sufficient power in them unto the life that God alone may grant.

Jesus seems cruel to us in this part of the gospel but he is not stupid and in an instant he understands what this woman has revealed to him about his mission, his self-understanding and his need to grow. Jesus is not static or fixed. He has the full dynamism of finitude, of a human being on the way and underway to the full flourishing of his gifts. She has managed to open him up where he had been closed off. She has moved him to see her and her daughter not as ciphers, not as alien but as persons under duress. Her word has opened his ear so that he might hear at last what he had not been prepared to hear before. He once was blind but now he sees, he once was deaf but now he hears.

Do I still love Jesus? I love him just because he is so human. It may be true that I love him even more. He tires as I tire, he hides as I am want on occasion to do, he snaps as I often do and he allows himself to be enlarged, to grow and to learn as I pray I may.

I rejoice at Jesus' response to this woman when he realizes her turning of the table upon him. He tells her, "for saying that, you may go - - the demon has left your daughter." The Greek in which the gospel was written uses a most exalted word among the ancient Greeks, the word *logos*. Jesus refers to the woman's *logos*, which means word, speech and discourse. More importantly, it means teaching. The latter meaning is the one I prefer because through her teaching Jesus has learned something about himself by which his destiny is truly assured. The breadth, the scope of the table he sets has no limits on those to be received and if the substance of its abundance is to be his own flesh and blood, of these there shall be no end.

You notice in the lection, of course, that upon Jesus' return toward Galilee a deaf man who has an impediment in his speech is brought to him. We surmise that these two impairments are related. Hearing is a necessary precondition for speaking and so Jesus, the able physician that he is, takes care to repair the former before the latter. He opens the ears that the stricken

man may hear and with a bit of spit he touched his tongue that he might speak plainly. This miracle underscores the one that Jesus has already received from that Syrophenician woman. His ears were opened and he received as a consequence a form of speech that exceeded the curse and the insult with which our reading opened from the start. His tongue does not curse but blesses her and her daughter instead. It is an astonishing miracle of inversion. And Jesus is the beneficiary!

May I return to Shelby for the close of this sermon? I pray you will grant me to say a word about our design in this service. We had hoped from the start of this annual gathering 4 years ago to make plain the truth of the gospel. God's children have always already been in a state of dispersion, separation and division. And I suppose that in some degree this is to be expected. There are many languages, modes of dress, enduring customs, traditional beliefs, culinary practices and preparations, forms of song and dance that bespeak the vitality of human cultures the whole world round. And as much as we might want to celebrate them, we are just as likely, if not more so, to exercise a wary caution and suspicion about those who do not look like us, do not speak like us, who do not dress like us or fail to think like us.

I mean, what are we to do, after all, about Episcopalians and AMEs? Shelby and I are determined to bring all of you along with us to a common table, first to that table “of bread and wine and good words” of which Shelby spoke in her opening jest. This is the table of Jesus for which you have no need of bulletins.

What has been torn asunder between us in history, Christ now overcomes in this Holy Communion. When we have been deaf to one another he has opened our ears to hear. If we have spoken ill of each other with spite or loathing, Jesus now removes this impediment too. And the table bearing the load of all our needs for life and even for life abundant, this table now groaning with the great weight of its largesse feeds you and me and the rest who may come in the years ahead to join us. I hope the whole world will spill in. I am pleased enough in what I have received already that I would gladly gather the crumbs from beneath the table, dog gone it!

AMEN

