

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
September 9, 2018, Proper 18  
Be Opened  
Mark 7:24-37; Isaiah 35:4-7a  
Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

On Friday afternoon I had a phone call from a clergy colleague who's been serving as a transitional pastor at a church not unlike ours – it's been a rocky road for that church and for my friend over the past couple of years. Not that her leadership wasn't valued by the congregation, but they continue to struggle with the same problems many churches face these days – declining membership, financial difficulties. My friend and I have talked many times over the past months and she had been wondering if it was time for her to move on – wondering what it is that God wants for that church and for her. She was taking the summer to really pray and try to discern what it was God wanted from her. That's a tough spot to be in for sure – for both her and the church.

This week she met with the Pastoral Relations Committee at the church at their request and of course she was a little nervous – she was calling to report on the outcome of the meeting - it was a bit of a surprise to my friend – after a wonderfully deep and profound conversation, the church offered her the position of settled pastor. There was a real affirmation of her ministry there and a commitment from the congregation that they wanted to continue that relationship. She was deeply touched by this meeting and accepted the call – excited and looking forward to continuing her journey with this church.

Turns out that both the church and she had been on a journey of discernment in a parallel way – bringing with it all the fear, uncertainty, anxiety that comes with this – but both of them had an openness to the possibilities God would put in front of them – and they both realized that her ministry is not done at that church – God is calling them to continue their journey in a new way. What a celebration they will have when she is installed as the settled pastor, probably in December.

I've always believed when I'm on a journey of discernment – that the solution would become clear. But we have to be open to this, don't we. And I couldn't help but think about our Isaiah passage from this morning –

“Be strong and do not fear”. The hope and the joy of this promise from Isaiah is one we all yearn for, isn’t it. We are called to expect that water will break forth from the wilderness and streams in the desert.

The solution to our journey of discernment may not come in the way we envision it – but this passage reminds me of the hope God holds out in front of us when we pay attention and let it happen.

Here’s another example – yesterday when I was working on this sermon, I thought my computer had crashed – the screen went blank, the cursor blinking up in the corner. That’s my worst nightmare – and I thought it had come true! I’ve known for a couple days that it was acting up – blaming it on the heat - and managed to get documents onto flash drives so at least I had a backup so all wouldn’t be lost. But when I couldn’t get it to come back up, I was pretty freaked out – no other way to describe it.

So, I got myself another cup of coffee and considered options....I returned a phone call and as I was talking, I heard that blessed musical tone coming out of the computer – it was coming back up and the good news is that I hadn’t lost what I’d done. Talk about the tongue of the speechless singing for joy. All I could say was thank you, God – and either today or tomorrow I will get a new computer. I have no explanation for what happened, but I am so very grateful – and so glad that I had a backup.

All the plans we make for ourselves can get derailed, can’t they. We can get so caught up in frustration, get so freaked out in trying to make our plans happen, to meet our own goals in our own way that we can get so lost. Now, my computer problems are small potatoes compared to the problems others face on a daily basis, but yesterday afternoon I didn’t want to hear that. I was lucky – I got a reprieve – and I’m so grateful for that. But it has inspired me to action – finally - with a real sense of hope.

We’ve all been in that place, haven’t we.

Too much to do, too little time, wondering how we can overcome the obstacles in front of us.

I love the season of fall – especially as the weather gets cooler – doesn’t it feel better after the last couple of weeks we’ve had. The downside of fall, though, is that it gets dark earlier, and the pace of activity increases, schedules filling up after the quieter days of summer. That’s true here at the church too, as meetings start up, choir rehearsals start, planning for confirmation class and Sunday School is in full swing.

With our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration this year, there’s already a difference in the church calendar – special events, concerts, special worship services – it’s going to be a good and full year.

But sometimes it does feel like there's just too much to do in too short a time – doesn't it. And there's so much noise around us! There's so much pulling at us. Where will we spend our time and energy? Where is God calling us? Individually? As church?

We are constantly being asked to commit ourselves in so many places. And we hear the same words right here too - this church needs all of us to share our time, talent, and treasure to continue, to grow, our ministry.

We all have to make choices – there are lots of worthwhile and important claims on our time, talents, and resources: it is the world we live in, but it doesn't take long to soon wonder where our loyalties, our priorities are, and how thin can we spread ourselves.

Isaiah in today's lesson tells those who are of a fearful heart, be strong! Do not fear. What were those people frightened of? Isaiah describes them as folks not unlike ourselves, who have given their loyalty to the pursuit of self, or of the world, or trusted in laws and sacrifices rather than a relationship with God. What choices do we make? And why? Because most everything we do is a choice.

We do choose to fill our calendars - maybe too full. But all of us here today have made another choice too: to set aside this time to come before God in praise and thanksgiving, to introduce our children to the Story, to gather in worship as part of the Body of Christ. I believe we know somehow that all the stuff, all the chaos around us still leaves us empty – we're looking for something more, aren't we. We're looking for something that's eternal, that will last, that will never let us down, that really means something in the world around us – that offers an alternative to the craziness around us - that fosters hope, joy, a peace that we yearn for.

A very wise minister once asked me in the midst of a conversation we were having about just these things, "How's your relationship with God? How much time do you spend talking to God, listening to God, looking for God's direction in your life?"

I ask us all to consider that very question: to stop the swirling noise around us and listen and ask, "God, could you be a little clearer? Help me to hear what you are saying to me – as a person created in your image, as a church called together as your Body right here, right now."

So, today, now, let's allow ourselves to be the deaf person presented to Jesus in the gospel lesson. Imagine being brought to Jesus, not being able to hear the voices of others, led to him by your friends, but seeing the faces of strangers, vulnerable to the whispers and prejudices of the world. Let's allow ourselves to stand before him.

Regardless of how busy he might be, this moment will be with you and you alone. He takes you aside and for that moment, you are the only person in the crowd to him. Feel his gaze deep into your eyes, touching your innermost being, your soul. He is not afraid to come close and touch you, even putting his fingers in your ears and upon your tongue. You watch him as his own lips form words, spoken toward the heavens, and suddenly you can hear him, and you can speak to him as you have never spoken before.

Friends, that moment will come. God will come to you, and you are told not to be afraid. In his gift of himself, you will be offered new life, the opportunity to hear his words, to see his presence, to feel his love, to speak own his promise for yourself. Will you recognize his presence, his voice? Will your life be changed because you allowed yourself to be presented in all your weakness before God when he took you aside and touched you with his life and love?

What did it mean for the deaf man in the gospel from today? It did change his life - he couldn't keep from telling what had happened. The mountains and valleys that had blocked him from hearing and speaking were removed, and the way was made clear for him. Will that be the way it is for us today? And will we go forth from this place proclaiming what God has done for us through Jesus Christ? Will we live as Jesus has taught us? Will our very actions, even without words, tell of God's wondrous works in and through us?

Please believe this: the person who knows what it is to stand before God and not be afraid will have ears to hear the voice of God in the world, in people they meet, where they may least expect to hear that voice. And the person who has known God coming into his or her life will become present to others in new ways including friends, families, co-workers, strangers - even as Jesus is present for us today. He comes to us, and we must go into the world. We will find the words to convey his promises, to manifest his love, to offer his people hope. We will touch others as we have been touched.

Today Jesus Christ invites you forward to be touched by him, to be given new life through him. If you accept his invitation, though, you will also be accepting a responsibility to proclaim the Christ in you by what you do and what you say. Do not be deaf to the cries of the world searching for life. Do not be deaf to your neighbor in need, to the loneliness, the pain, the fear, that cries out to be healed. Do not be silent about the Christ who brings wholeness and life to answer those cries. Become a sacrament -

allowing God to use you as an instrument for bringing his grace into the world.

Go into the world of your children, of your work, of your neighborhoods, of your town, of the world. Know that the schedules you keep are not burdens, but rather openings to share the new life you have found in Christ this morning and every Sunday. Know that God is with you, and have no fear. Receive the gift of life and share it.

I pray that we hear this prayer of Mother Theresa and make it our own now and always: Here I am, Lord - body, heart and soul. Grant that with your love, I may be big enough to reach the world, and small enough to be at one with you.

Lord, open our eyes, that we may see in you our brothers and sisters.

Lord, open our ears, that we may hear the cries of the hungry, the cold, the frightened, the oppressed.

Lord, open our hearts, that we may love each other as you love us.

Renew in us your spirit.

Lord, free us and make us one. Amen.

### Sunday School Dedication - 9/7/97

Following these moments of dedication of our new Sunday School year, I would ask the teachers to leave during the first verse of the hymn and meet their children in the Social Room to lead them to class. Children, please leave during the second verse of the hymn.

Following Jesus is not an easy choice. It means learning to be a loving community despite our different ages, opinions, personalities, and ways of doing things. It means living a life that is often at odds with the society around us. It means following Jesus, who asks us to seek justice, resist evil, and love even those who would hurt us. It means trusting that true joy and fulfillment come in joining with Jesus on life's journey.

A covenant is a special agreement we make with God and each other to live in God's ways. To recovenant is to make that promise again. Let us now recovenant together with God as we begin another year of church school.

#### CHILDREN AND CONFIRMATION CLASS STAND:

You are the children and youth of our church. We love you. You are all special and important to us. Will you covenant to come to your classes, to listen to your teachers and each other, and share what you have learned with all of the rest of us? Please answer: we will, with the help of God.

#### WILL THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN CALLED TO THE TEACHING MINISTRY OF THIS CHURCH PLEASE STAND:

You have been called by God and chosen by this church to serve as teachers in our midst. You have accepted this call and stand before us in witness to their willingness to serve. Through this decision you acknowledge your interest in continuing to keep the promise given to our children at their baptism to nurture and care for them in the Christian faith. Are you willing to share your gifts and talents as you help them to grow in their understanding of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the church? Do you promise to plan your time together with care, to listen, to share, and to grow with the children, God being your helper?

Please respond: we do, with the help of God.

PARENTS please stand:

The purpose of our church school is to provide a program shared by both the church and the home. Do you promise to show an active interest in your children's church experience, and to reaffirm their baptism by mutually sharing and growing together in the Christian faith?

Response: We do, with the help of God.

**CONGREGATION PLEASE STAND:**

You each, individually and collectively, are called to share in the nurturing and caring of our children. Having heard the promises of the children and youth, the Church School teachers, and the parents, do you promise to support all of them?

Response: We do, with the help of God.

We are all learners and teachers in our faith community - children, youth, adults. Let us celebrate our joy of being faithful to one another in our covenant relationship and let us pray together as written in the Order of Worship: