

Sermon, 10 September 2006—Proper 18

First Sermon at St. John's, Saint Cloud

Isaiah 35:4-7; Psalm 146; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:31-7

Through the goodness of God, all of us have been entrusted with the proclamation of the Way of Life; and we have been brought together here so that we can tell each other what we know about God's grace, help each other see that grace active among us, take part in that saving activity with joy and conviction, and so learn to give thanks to God in all the circumstances of our life. This is the first sermon I will preach during my time here at St. John's in Saint Cloud, so I turned to the Lectionary eager to see what guidance is there for us as we enter into this period of mutual discernment and ministry.

One of the hardest things we Christians have to do is to hear clearly what Scripture says and to speak truly what we know about God. That challenge is what the healing story we heard today is about. When I was a child, and for much of my adulthood, I had a notion that the followers of Jesus were joyful and confident around him, awed by his power, won over by his wisdom and love. They were in the presence of a profound spiritual teacher and a compassionate healer, basking in that light day after day, coming to realize that it was the light of the Son of God, and giving themselves without reservation—as all of us long to give ourselves—to something greater than themselves, something which cost their entire life, but which gave them back a purposeful increased abundant life where the slightest event was radiant with human meaning and divine glory.

A closer reading of Scripture shows that Jesus' followers were confused and petty, willing to be with him, but not sure why, still concerned about social prestige and personal safety even among themselves, and in the end terrified and cowardly. As Mark depicts them, they were notoriously

hard of hearing, and they talked with their mouth full of self-interest and self-satisfaction. They had, as the man in today's story had, impediments; and these impediments were their expectations, which they had to break through and discard, if they were to come to know Jesus for himself.

So it is supremely interesting to see how the two other lessons we have today model for us what the disciples themselves had to do in order to come to hear and to speak God-with-us. Matthew and Luke both tell a story in which John the Baptizer, imprisoned, sends to ask Jesus "are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" It is a rather shocking question, since this is the man that both Matthew and Luke depict as the forerunner who proclaimed Jesus as the one sent by God. Jesus, in response to John's question, simply says, "Go back and tell him what you hear and see;" and then Jesus lists the signs of the presence of the Messiah: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Jesus makes reference to the passage from Isaiah that we heard today, in effect saying, "if you want to know whether or not the Messiah is present, you will know, not by what he says about himself, but by the changes around him, which are what God has always done on behalf of those who are disenfranchised and impoverished and enslaved and numb with longing and loss."

Now this story is not told as a slur on John the Baptizer; Jesus himself praises John once John's disciples have left. It is told to provide Christian communities with a checklist of the signs of God's presence among them. Isaiah was proclaiming what God's intervention on behalf of those God loves looks like. Whether or not John the Baptizer asked the question, you can be sure Jesus' followers did, even in the depths of their heart: "are you the one?" It is the question you and I constantly carry around, the litmus

paper we dip into the space between every relationship: is this the moment that matters, is this the person worth my risk, is this what I am called to commit myself to? It will be, in some limited sense, the question before us here in the next eighteen months. Notice that Jesus refuses any direct flat answer. Instead he says, “Look around, what is beginning to happen? I can show you the results of God’s presence, but I cannot pull aside the veil, because no one can look on God and live. All you can observe in this life are effects; you cannot ever directly know the cause. Use what you have heard about God’s work to recognize God at work. Faith is nothing else than this conviction that, though you cannot demonstrate the source of the good, you recognize and proclaim and give thanks for the good. This man, who could neither hear nor speak, now has his ears open and his tongue loosened. Trust that more grace and blessings are there and there will be more; trust that no single miracle can exhaust God and miracles will be abundant; trust that you are loved and you will be able to live from love.”

So Jesus’ followers, during his lifetime and especially after his Resurrection, turned to the prophets to confirm the criteria they were to use for discernment: if God were present among us, how would we know it? Just as they did, we turn not only to the Prophets, but also to Gospels and Epistles to ask, if Jesus were present among us, if God were with us, what would be the signs? Blind eyes would see, deaf ears would hear, what had been silent would find its voice, what had been numb would feel, what had been bound would be released, and those without resources and in despair would recognize good news. The point of today’s first lesson is this: God is known as God has always been known in all the consistent testimony of the witnesses in Scripture across the centuries. God is known through the freeing of people into unimpeded abundant life, through the removal of all

barriers to our delight in creation, and through our sense of deep inextricable rootedness in the life-affirming presence of God.

Today's second lesson balances this excitement with a cautionary note. What we call the Letter of James is the most Jewish of all Christian Scripture. We still hear there the voice of the Hebrew prophets, denouncing self-serving hypocrisy and economic injustice. James reminds the man whose ears Jesus opened and whose tongue Jesus released that he is to be "quick to listen and slow to speak," because "anger does not produce God's righteousness." Freedom can all too easily become suicidal euphoria; excitement is not the surest sign that we are on the right track.

James' skepticism in the presence of enthusiasm calls into question conversion by hearing. Of course we must hear the Good News proclaimed, and of course we want to respond with rejoicing, but that, James says, is nothing more than staring into a mirror: as soon as we walk away, we forget what we look like. The image is chilling and profound, because we can approach our spiritual life as a way to reflect on ourselves, as a way to enhance our self-image before we head out to engage the world, as a self-regarding pose that we practice and perform. That approach has no depth, because it is solely about how we look to ourselves and how we intend to look to others. It is superficial because it is only about surfaces. We hear the good news; we want it to be true about us as well; we believe that wanting makes it so and that a little shudder of acquiescent emotion is good enough for God; then we walk away and forget it all—and we curse the traffic, kick the dog, and stare sullenly and silently at the potatoes on our dinner plate, before dozing off in front of the TV.

So James says, "Be doers of the word, not merely hearers who deceive themselves." And for James, there are only two criteria that matter: to care

for widows and orphans in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. In both of these, our model is Jesus.

What is remarkable about this healing story we heard today is how unhygienic it is. Jesus puts his fingers in the man's ears; he takes saliva from his own mouth and puts it on the man's tongue. No health inspector would permit this. But this messiness is the perfect depiction of the incarnation, of God's direct involvement with us, even down to bodily fluids. It may seem distasteful, but it makes the point that nothing carnal is offensive to God, who made the very flesh God acts to sustain and restore. Deep healing, as every nurse and every mother know, cannot take place if we are afraid of bodies, but only when we care for bodies. Widows and orphans need food and shelter and ways to tend to their physical functions, not distractions and evasions that sound good, but prolong their suffering.

But if this hands-on approach is what Jesus models, then keeping oneself unstained by the world cannot mean that we are to refuse to engage at the level of actual physical need and consolation; nor ought we to give in to the sexual obsessions of our culture and interpret keeping oneself unstained solely as a blunt recommendation of chastity. We are in the world, and it is the world that God loves, and that needs God, and that does not know its own need. To move through that suffering without believing its fear and rage and grief, without buying its version of the way things are, without consenting that there is no hope, without becoming exhausted and resentful ourselves and lashing out—that is to keep oneself unstained by the world. Everything we know about Jesus, everything we know about God, comes to us illuminated by the Resurrection. There is nothing, not even death, that can keep us from the love of God, which is the only thing to desire and the only thing to know. That love itself, incarnate in Jesus,

remains unstained by the world, and instead washes all the world in the blood of that immaculate lamb, who is given to us, by God's potent promise, in the form of bread and wine at every Eucharist.

My dear sisters and brothers, over the next several months, and if God wills it, for the next several years, we will hope to have our ears opened and our tongues loosened so we can testify to the work that God is doing in Saint Cloud, recognizing those signs of healing and reconciliation and encouragement, and stretching out our hands to share in those mighty acts by which God restores all things. I ask for your prayers, as I pledge you my own, knowing that God is always ready to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine and that all things work together for good for those who love God, whom we praise this day, as we hope to praise for all eternity, as the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one God now and forever.