

“And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.”

Mark’s Gospel recounts this miracle moment, as a deaf man finds healing at the hands of Jesus—and becomes free to speak without impediment.

In ancient biblical times, deafness and other physical impairments were typically considered a consequence of the person’s sin. People with disabilities were generally excluded from social and religious circles and cultural connections.

It would be likewise so for the demon-possessed daughter of the Gentile woman who approached Jesus for help. This deaf man and this girl with an unclean spirit would likely have been outcasts—people forced to live on the margins of society.

So, when Jesus healed people, he didn’t just cure their physical and emotional impairments. He restored them to community—and in doing so, he transformed their lives.

There’s much we could unpack about how these miracles unfolded, including the somewhat unnerving juxtaposition between Jesus’s harsh words to the Gentile woman, and his ultimate act of compassion and mercy.

But I’d like to spend some this morning exploring something else, because I’m just as struck by the actions of the people in these stories as I am by Jesus’s response: the daring—the chutzpah, if you will—of a Gentile woman who approaches Jesus, a man and a Jew, and the determination of those who bring

a physically impaired man to Jesus to heal—and what remarkable things can happen when we act boldly in faith.

Last week our lay preacher Jonathan mentioned that I'd advised him to not try to tackle all three readings in one sermon. It's advice I typically follow myself, but it's worth noting that this thread of boldness runs all too clearly through today's Old Testament reading, the Epistle, and the Gospel lesson.

We first encounter it in Isaiah: 'Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God....He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped...the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.'

The ancient prophet vigorously proclaims God's plan for healing and reconciliation—assuring the Israelites that out of suffering, joy will emerge; out of injustice, justice will prevail.

That thread of boldness carries through to our Epistle, with James calling his listeners out for raising the rich up on pedestals while neglecting the poor, admonishing them that they cannot claim to follow Jesus—yet act without mercy.

James wrote his letters about 50 years after Jesus's death, as a sort of practical guide for early followers. Some 2,000 years later, in today's capitalist, celebrity-infatuated culture, things haven't much changed.

The Epistle calls Christians, then and now, to a higher standard of love, a sacrificial "agape" love that empowers us to bear each other's burdens, to include those the world tends to exclude, to live into James' advice: "You do

well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” James doesn’t mince words on this point: faith by itself, without works, is dead.

In contrast, Mark’s Gospel recalls stories of faith walking hand in hand with works—acts of impartiality toward neighbors considered “undesirable” and “unclean.”

We see similar examples of this earlier in Mark, when a group of men carry a paralyzed friend to a house where crowds have gathered, lowering him through an opening in the roof, in the certainty Jesus will heal him.

When people boldly approach Jesus in faith, Jesus responds.

Of course, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that for every miracle moment of healing, there are just as many stories of continuing struggle with disease, ongoing pain, and lifelong disability. God answers prayers, but not always in the ways we hope for—healing can look very different than we expect.

But God wants us all to be made whole, regardless of our personal circumstances and challenges. There is no partiality in God’s love. God’s love knows no bounds.

It is that enduring Good News that calls us in the here and now to balance belief with action and live courageously into the Gospel.

There’s a particular word for this boldness of faith: evangelism.

Many Episcopalians treat evangelism as almost a dirty word. It can conjure images of people going door to door to speak of the path to salvation, people shouting on street corners with Bibles raised over their heads, people putting a discomfoting emphasis on their “personal conversion” experiences. But true evangelism really gets a bad rap.

In its purest form, it describes the act of spreading the Good News—the word itself deriving from the Greek word for ‘gospel’ or ‘good news.’

The national Episcopal Church has this to say about evangelism: “Every baptized Episcopalian has vowed to proclaim with our words and our lives the loving, liberating, and life-giving good news of Jesus Christ. Through the spiritual practice of evangelism, we seek, name and celebrate Jesus’ loving presence in the stories of all people – then invite everyone to more.”¹

To proclaim with our words and our lives the good news of Jesus Christ. Friends, some of the most powerful stories of the Good News are told with few or no words at all.

They are the stories we live out here at Christ Church. When we bring meals to Grassroots to help those experiencing food insecurity. When we deliver backpacks filled with school supplies each August to students at Lake Elkhorn Middle School. When we open our doors to share diverse offerings of spiritual nourishment and health and wellness. When we pray for each other, sit with each other, and minister to each other in our sickness, in our grief, in our darkest moments of vulnerability. When we step out into the unknown to

¹ [Evangelism – The Episcopal Church](#)

welcome the stranger among us, as we did when we welcomed a refugee family from Afghanistan.

Ziba, Anwar, Ijaz, and Mati came to us three years ago with little more than a few bags of clothes and photos and documents they grabbed as they fled their home. During one of the first conversations I had with Anwar, the eldest son, he asked, “Why do Christians want to help Muslims?”

It is a question I attempted to answer then with words. But I believe this community has offered a much richer answer to that question through our actions: in how we took a risk and stepped out in faith to respond to our baptismal call to serve those on the margins, acting with impartiality to love our neighbor—all our neighbors—not just the ones who look and sound and live like we do.

From those early days of welcoming this family, we’ve formed deep, enduring bonds and connections. And we have received as much blessing as we have given. It’s a relationship that has borne fruit that’s now spread to six faith communities and four families, a model for how we can be more impactful in living out the Gospel’s message of love.

If that isn’t evangelism, I don’t know what is.

Are there any limits to what we can accomplish when we are bold in our faith?

These stories—your stories—are the stories that bring me great joy as I come to the point where I must say goodbye.

Last Sunday, a parishioner came up to me after the service and said, “Do you know what I’ll miss most when you leave?”

I shook my head, and she replied, “I will miss how you hold the Gospel book high when you come out to read it.”

I must admit, I did not expect this answer. But it stayed with me all week: the fact that this parishioner was so struck by the image of the Gospel raised up high for all to see—what we deacons do as second nature, part of our liturgical function, walking into the midst of the congregation to proclaim and share the Good News with everyone—a visible symbol that none are excluded, God’s love is for all.

My departure will not change this, no matter how the Gospel book is brought forward. As you all live out your faith through works in so many beautiful ways, as you share your stories of God at work, you hold the Gospel high for all to see.

The Church as we know it will likely look very different in 10, 20, 100 years. Many congregations are lamenting this change. They fret over empty pews and average Sunday attendance. They form a committee to strategize on how to get people back to church. My thinking aligns more with that of contemporary theologian Brian McLaren, who says,

“If you want to see the future of Christianity...don’t look at a church building. Go look in the mirror and look at your neighbor. God’s message of love is sent into the world in human envelopes. If you want to see a great spiritual migration

begin, then let it start right in your body. Let your life be a foothold of liberation.”

I do not fear for the future of the Church, because *you all* are the future of the Church. You are human envelopes bearing God’s message of love. And I am truly blessed to have had this time with you. We have ministered together, rejoiced and celebrated together, shared frustration and tears, learned from each other and grown together. I will carry with me the experiences I’ve had here to continue my ministry at St. Peter’s, and beyond.

As I leave this beloved community, I pray that you continue to challenge yourself to hold the Gospel high. I pray you explore those places of meekness and uncertainty where you’re being called to step out and be the living, breathing Gospel in the world. I pray you seek out those people in your communities—at work, in your neighborhood, in your social circles—who need you to walk boldly alongside of them, to invite them, through the awesome presence of Jesus dwelling within you, to experience God’s healing love.

I’ll leave you all with these words from a prayer from Saint Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body but yours,

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,

Yours are the eyes with which He looks

Compassion on this world,

Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,

Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,

Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours...