

## Sermon (September 5, 2021)

As most of you know, I am an occasional preacher. I am preaching once this year and I preached once last year. Yes, I think twice in a lifetime can be considered occasional.

Even though I am an occasional preacher, I think God is playing games with me. Here's why. The Gospel lesson a year ago was Matthew's account of a shouting Canaanite woman pleading for Jesus to cast out a demon tormenting her daughter. Though annoyed, Jesus granted her request because of her great faith.

After Elizabeth and I agreed that today would be the day that I had another opportunity to preach I looked up the scripture passages for the day. God apparently wanted me to preach on Mark's version of the same story! What are the odds?

According to Mark, the Canaanite woman is a Syrophenician, not a Canaanite, though I suspect they are the same thing. What's important is that the woman was not Jewish. Jesus was once again annoyed, but granted her request. It's comforting that Matthew and Mark got their stories straight.

One of my themes from last year was about "the other," how the dominant culture treats the other, and what is the experience of those who are not part of the dominant culture. I asked, what does Jesus teach us about the relationship between the dominant culture and "the other"?

The lesson I drew from Jesus' example was that he did not ignore the woman or her pleas. He noticed her and responded to her plea. I concluded, "For me it probably starts with paying attention and noticing. Noticing when I have benefited and someone else has not. Noticing, rather than turning away from, the homeless. Engaging with, rather than ignoring, the shouting Canaanite woman. But what will it cost me to pay attention and notice?"

Here I want to ask again, is God playing games with me? While I don't believe that God put the homeless encampment in front of St. Andrew's to test me, it did, in fact, test me to act on my question of exactly what I meant by "noticing and not turning away" and what does "not turning away" mean anyway?

This brings me to our New Testament lesson from James. James asks "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" I'm not a biblical scholar but I know enough to know there is a theological richness in the conversation about the roles of faith and works.

After an exhaustive search on the internet – at least I was exhausted – I learned that some had argued to keep James out of the bible over his emphasis on works. Regardless, I think James' point was that works are a natural outcome of faith, not that faith and works represent two separate score-keeping ledgers – how great is your faith and how great are your works?

"Noticing and not turning away." It was impossible not to notice the homeless encampment right under our noses, but what did I really mean by not turning away? Is the notion of "works" part of not turning away?

What I want to explore today is the second part of the Gospel reading. After Jesus granted the Canaanite, Syrophenician woman her request, Jesus went on to miraculously give hearing to a deaf man and at the same time cure his speech impediment.

In the Old Testament reading for today that we did not read, Isaiah talks about God opening the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, making the lame leap like deer, and the speechless sing for joy.

Isaiah's poetry can be comforting and inspiring as well as foreboding and threatening. And miracles, whether they are real or apocryphal, can be good for attracting attention.

Jesus' mission was to deliver a message to as many people as he could, to teach what we know as the Gospel. What better marketing strategy than to produce a miracle or two for people to talk about? The passage from Mark says that "Jesus ordered them to tell no one [about the miracle]; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it." I suspect Jesus knew this would happen. He didn't just fall off a carpenter's workbench, after all.

In the previous Chapter of Mark's Gospel, Mark says "When [Jesus] came ashore, he saw a great crowd; and his heart went out to them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he had much to teach them." People were clamoring for Jesus to hear his teaching and to ask for healing miracles.

I have been wondering if these are two different things -the desire for a healing miracle and the clamoring to hear Jesus teach - or if they are really the same thing? Don't we often think, wouldn't it be a miracle if – fill-in the blank with a name – would finally realize – fill-in in the blank with a topic? Why are they so "blind," why are they so "lame" as we often say? Or as others would say about me, why is Roger so blind, why is he so lame?

A year ago when I last preached – you can almost set your calendar to it – I reflected on "the other" and the divisions that we create. I specifically mentioned divisions based on black/white, rich/poor, Jew/Gentile. While differences are to be celebrated, perpetuating divisions is a demon that perhaps we need Jesus to cast out.

It may be one of the best kept secrets at St. Andrew's (don't tell anyone), but last year the vestry created a small "welcoming and inclusion" group to look at ways that, as a community, we may not see or hear as clearly as we think we do. To ask, does our self-image blind us in ways that we, perhaps with more openness to Jesus' teaching, could heal and help us see better.

Putting my Senior Warden hat on for a moment, if anyone is interested in participating in this important work, please see me.

Welcoming and inclusion is not only based on black/white, rich/poor, and Jew/Gentile, but it is about any grouping where there is the dominant culture and “the other.” This includes sexual orientation and gender identity. It may also include separations based on political philosophy or other divisions that we are consciously or unconsciously perpetuating.

People were clamoring to hear Jesus teach and to plead for healing miracles. I think these can be same thing – hearing Jesus’ teaching and being healed by a miracle.

There are times when I need to have the log removed from my eye and the cotton balls taken out of my ears so I can understand Jesus’ message.

There are times when I need to have my tongue loosened so that I can speak on behalf of those who are not welcomed and included fully.

There are times when I need to have my lameness cured so that I can act to make my contributions to creating sanctuary in the world.

It seems like it is human nature to divide, to create “the other.”

It is challenging to be welcoming and inclusive to someone different.

It seems impossible to address conditions such as homelessness, and perhaps even more so when they are literally right in front of us.

Maybe the best we can do is to continue to clamor to hear the teachings of Jesus, to continue to pray for miracles to cure our blindness and our lameness and to excise the demons that divide us.

We can’t do it alone. It will take a miracle.