

“Plain Speaking”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 6, 2015

Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: James 2: 1-10, 14-17 Mark 7: 24-37

James 2: 1-10, 14-7

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ² For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³ and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” ⁴ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷ Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸ You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ⁹ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark 7: 24-37

The Syrophenician Woman’s Faith

²⁴ From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Jesus Cures a Deaf Man

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Plain Speaking

This Labor Day Weekend it does appear
that there are more words in our fair city than anywhere
else.

College football has begun with a flourish;
Atlanta is abuzz with visiting alums from major universities
who have filled whatever space and airwaves are

available.

DragonCon participants are parading around Atlanta in fantastic costumes,

speaking in Elvish or Klingon.

We are delighted to be hosting the Decatur Book Festival.

Our downtown common grounds are overflowing an estimated 80,000 readers, authors and artisans, publishers and poets, mythmakers and earth shakers from around the world.

That, my friends, is a lot of words.

We are literally and figuratively surrounded by words.

Sometimes we hear so much, tweet so much, post so much, say so much

that it's difficult to discern which words matter most.

What phrase do you use to get someone's attention?

When some one tells you,

"You must understand this" or "Listen to me" or "This is important"

are you apt to pay closer attention?

Or do they have to say your full name?!

We find these same terms and phrases in the Holy Scriptures.

Both the Gospel of Mark and the wisdom writings of James get right to the heart of God's intent.

You must understand this.

This is important.

This is essential, necessary, vital, indispensable.

Plain Speaking

In the Gospel of Mark we learn that Jesus walked

from Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Galilee out into Gentile territory;

Mark informs us that Jesus went

from Tyre to Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the midst of

Decapolis.

Never mind, my friends, that Sidon is north of Tyre,
and forget for a moment that the Sea of Galilee
is not in the midst of Decapolis.

Whatever may have been Mark's knowledge of geography or
sources,

there is no doubt about his intention:

Jesus made a wide-ranging journey in Gentile territory
to heal the sick, exorcise demons, teach children and
adults,
and share the message of God's redeeming, forgiving
love.

If you were to focus only on Jesus' actions
-- how he healed the Syrophenician woman's daughter
and healed the deaf man from Decapolis --
you will see that the message of God's love
is to be taken to the farthest corners of the earth.

The message of God's love
is to be given to people who are not mirror images of
ourselves.

The message of God's love
is that Jesus Christ knows no boundaries, in heaven or on
earth.

And the message of God's love
is that if we are to receive it, we must first be open,
open to listening to one another
as well as open to speaking plainly,
faithfully, graciously, kindly with one
another.

Plain Speaking

"Now listen to this..."

*When Jesus healed the daughter of the Syrophenician woman,
He first had to face the demons of his own prejudices.*

The Syrophenician woman responded with grace and wit,
even though she was most likely hurt
and very possibly dismayed by his comment.

She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ *He said to her, "Let the children be fed first,
for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

²⁸ *But she answered him,
"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*

Jesus paused.

At least, I like to think he did,
that the Son of God paused to catch his breath
and think twice before he spoke again.

I like to think Jesus paused
because when you add some silence between the responses,
between the give and take of a daily conversation,
it adds the depth and weight of careful
thought.

Did Jesus realize that what might have preceded the comment was
wrong?

Did he suddenly realize that he had erred?

Did he consider that his comments and prejudiced response were
racially biased?

He may have been given pause,
knowing that he had just lost an argument yet gained some
growth.

²⁹ *Then he said to her,*

"For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

³⁰ *So she went home,
found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

Even though she had been slighted, even though she was treated rudely,

she held fast and firm and faithfully to her trust in God.
Her daughter was healed, her faith was redoubled,
and Jesus, well,

Jesus went forth into new territory
with renewed passion and compassion.

Moving forward from Jesus' encounter

with the Syrophenician woman and her daughter,

he found himself face to face

with a deaf man from yet another culture
in the region of Tyre.

Plain Speaking

Now listen to this.

When Jesus healed a deaf man,

He took the man aside, privately,

Away from gawkers

He took the man aside, apart, away

From the multitude. He put his fingers

Into the deaf-mute's ears. He spat

And touched his tongue...

He looked into heaven.

He sighed and said, "Ephphatha! Be opened!"

When his ears were opened

And his tongue released,

The [man] spoke plainly. Of course.

Now that we have [reheard] the event,

Do we understand it better? Of course not.

Let's start with something easier.

Try listening to what others say.

Say how you feel, and watch your tongue come untied.

Get somebody you can trust to practice on.

*Try it on your own wife or husband,
Father, mother, brothers, sisters, children, friends.*

Plain speaking, honest, gentle, faith sharing and talking with one another starts with being open, with listening.

I love the story about the woman who walked into a hearing aid center.

She asked the clerk, *"How much does a new hearing aid cost?"*

"Well, we have them from \$2,500 down to \$1.50."

"Tell me what the \$2,500 hearing aid is like."

"It is a dandy.

It's the latest in micro-technology, & will translate three languages."

"And what about the one for just a buck fifty?"

"All it is, you see, is a button attached to a string."

"How can a button on a string work to cure deafness?"

"It doesn't work;

however if you place the button in your ear
and drop the string into a pocket
it is amazing how loud people will talk!"

Plain speaking begins with the spiritual practice of listening.

The Christian Science Monitor carried an article

written by a Christian
who went to a series of classes
on the subject of Effective Speaking.

The student wrote:

"I was hoping I would learn how to project my thoughts better.

What I learned was something better.

I learned to listen.

The teacher was blind.

He did not see people speaking; he heard them.

He listened.

I realized I had not been listening -- not as well as I could.

I watched people talking, heard them making sounds,

but only partly got the message.

That "effective speaking class" became an "effective listening class" for me.

I learned that listening is more than just hearing with the ears.

Listening, considered spiritually, is understanding and caring."

Plain speaking begins with listening,
and listening, considered spiritually,
is understanding and caring.

On Sunday mornings,

Mr. Anthony has a p/t job at the Jackson Sun newspaper
office,

working in the circulation department.

He answers the phone and has newspapers sent out to people
who did not get their Sunday morning edition.

When it doesn't rain, the phone rarely rings

so he slips out the office and goes to church.

When it does rain, the newspaper phone rings off the hook.

According to Mr. Anthony, this is a typical Sunday morning
conversation:

"Hello, is this the Jackson Sun?"

“Yes, this is Mr. Anthony for the circulation department. May I help you?”

“You blankety-blank idiots!

Don't you know how to deliver newspapers?

My paper was thrown in the mud by your blankety-blank delivery person;

now the paper is soaked, I'm late,

and its time for me to go to church!”

True story

Plain Speaking

You and I could own

the world's largest King James Version of the Bible

and have perfect attendance in Sunday school and

worship,

yet the moment we treat one another in such a manner,

As James said So faith by itself, if it has no works [or Good Words!], is dead.

As Paul said we are empty gongs and clanging cymbals,

As Isaiah said we are dry land with no vision of crocus blossoms,

we are blind with no hope for either sight or insight,

we are deaf and our ears need to be unstopped.

Pause.

Think twice.

Listen spiritually.

Express yourself in such a way that people will hear Jesus when you speak.

Plain Speaking

When Jim Wallis was a university student,

every Christian group on campus tried to evangelize him

and get him to join their church or fellowship group.
No one was successful in drawing Jim Wallis in.
His basic response to their preaching was,
"How can I believe when I look at the way the church lives?"
The Christians answered, *"Don't look at the church, look at Jesus."*

Today Jim Wallis is a Christian minister of the Gospel,
living and working in the Sojourners community
in the heart of an inner-city community in
Washington, DC.

Today Wallis responds:

*"I now believe that statement [Don't look at the church; look at
Jesus.]
is one of the saddest in the history of the church.
It puts Jesus on a pedestal apart from the people who name his name.
Belief in him becomes an abstraction
removed from any demonstration
of its meaning in the world.
Such thinking is a denial
of what is most basic to the gospel: incarnation.
People should be able to look at the way we live
and begin to understand what the gospel is all about.
Our lives must tell them who Jesus is and what he cares about."*

In plain speech, Jesus was and is the Word incarnate.
His plain speaking gave us insight into we also might be the Word
incarnate.

Jesus showed us by his living and his giving how to be Christ-like,
so that, hopefully, possibly, gloriously
one day we might evangelize and heal, serve and
listen,

 speak plainly and faithfully with our
 neighbors
 of our own experiences of the Good
 News.

With humility and the capacity to grow and change,

Jesus showed us how to say to the world around us,
*“Look at how I live, at how I listen,
listen to my choices of words
and you will see Jesus!”*

The [man] spoke plainly, saying “Ephahtha! Be opened!”

Of course.

Do we understand it better?

Of course not.

Let's start with something easier.

Try listening to what others say.

Say how you feel, and watch your tongue come untied.

Get somebody you can trust to practice on.

Together you may discern what words matter most.

All power be to the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.