

Homily for Sunday, Sept. 4, 2021 – 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time



Geography plays an important role in Gospel stories. It's a little late for some of you who should have paid more attention in geography class back in high school. Don't feel so bad. In the official high school transcript, my grade in the last semester of high school geography, was a zero. I actually scored 100%, but the column where they registered the grades could only take two digits, so they decided to give me the last two digits. I went from hero to zero in one fell swoop.

Geography plays a role in our own spiritual lives as well. We think and pray differently when we leave the world of concrete and electronic gadgets, when we hike through a forest, when we stare at the Milky Way and wonder about our purpose in the cosmos. We are different in those moments and places, and so was Jesus when he went to the hills alone or when he fasted in the desert relying totally on God and asking questions that we have all asked.

The gospel today starts off by telling us about geography, how Jesus walked through the region of Tyre by way of Sidon, and how he journeyed to the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Decapolis (the "ten towns"). The route he took was meandering, not a direct or straight route whatsoever, and it was through Gentile (non-Jewish) territory. This is revealing. Jesus, a Jew, will not sit in Jerusalem and wait for like-minded, good church folks, to come to him. He is on a mission to all the world, to Jews and non-Jews alike. We are told that **"He has done everything well."** He comes from God the Creator who, when he created the world, also did everything well. In the creation story, all of creation was deemed good and even very good. Jesus is the savior of the world, and all the created world--no matter the geography--is under his messiahship. He is bringing us to our natural goodness; he is bringing us to wholeness.

From today's gospel we hear how Jesus encounters a man who is deaf and mute. This man cannot hear, and so to make sure he really can't hear, Jesus puts his finger in the man's ears. Now the deafness is complete. What is going on here? Jesus is blocking out the man's physical hearing. He wants this man to hear the truth.

However, before he can hear the truth, he must block out lies. A crowd has gathered we are told. Whenever you hear the word “crowd” in the scripture, it is code language for “false consciousness.” It was the crowd who yelled “crucify him, crucify him.” Mob mentality, crowd consciousness, is always false consciousness. And that is probably why the Christian life will always be counter-cultural. We were never meant to follow the crowd; we were always meant to follow the words and example of Christ. Once Jesus blocks this man’s ears to lies, he then opens them to truth.

We are also told the man is not only deaf but also mute. What comes next is the funniest episode in all four gospels. Jesus cures the man of his muteness and immediately tells the man not to say a word! This is Mark’s gospel and this silencing happens a lot in this gospel. It is what theologians call the “Messianic Secret.” It is like Jesus swears people to secrecy after each miracle. Unlike most politicians, Jesus is not into self-promotion, nor does he seek out human acclamation. He draws his self-worth from God who calls him his “beloved”. When you know this truth about yourself, and you draw on it like Jesus did, the desperate need for outer affirmation becomes unnecessary and unimportant.

But I think there’s something more going on when Jesus demands people keep his miracles a secret. You see, Jesus’ mission will only be fully understood after his death and resurrection. If you try to understand Jesus outside his death and resurrection, you will make all the wrong moves. The curing of the deaf/mute man is only a partial glimpse into all that Jesus is. A partial glimpse would lead us to believe Jesus was put on this earth simply to dazzle us as a miracle worker. In that case, a half truth, as they say, is as good as a lie. His death and resurrection, his proclamation of God’s Kingdom, are the greater contexts of Jesus’ miracles. If we stay close to the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have a better chance at understanding the whole truth of who he was. And since Jesus is the pattern of our lives, we will better understand who we truly are.

Jesus, we are told, used spit. Saliva is generated from a deeper place than the tongue. In this miracle, it is the depth of Jesus calling to the depth of this man, spirit calling upon spirit. How do we know that Jesus is drawing from a deep space within himself, and how do we know Jesus is calling on a deep space within this man? It says, ***“Jesus sighed” and said, “Ephphatha,” that is “Be open.”*** St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, speaks about sighing or moaning. St. Paul says that in our weakness,

when we don't even have the strength to formulate a pray with words, we are not to worry, because it is then that the Spirit prays in us with sighs (moans) that are much deeper than any words we could muster.

In the same way, Jesus also calls upon and sustains what is deepest in each of us, our souls. Your soul is the deepest part of who you are. Think of spirit as height, where you hold all things in common with every other human being. But think of soul as depth, where you are unique from everybody else. You are loved in your uniqueness and in the uniqueness of the experiences of your life. This once deaf and mute man knows he has been touched and loved deeply, in his soul. Knowing that, how can he possible keep it to himself by keeping his mouth shut! He has to do what Jesus told him not to do; he has to tell the world.

As I said, Jesus didn't want any witnesses to his miracles to go off with their half-baked ideas about who he really was until after his death and resurrection. Yet, the joy of this cured man is, in some sense, already a prefiguration of the joy experienced by Mary Magdalene and the apostles on that first Easter morning. Joy is joy. It's what emerged in people when they had a genuine encounter with Jesus, whether before or after the resurrection.

Since the day that Jesus first appeared on the scene, we have developed vast theological systems, organized world-wide churches, filled libraries with Christological scholarship, engaged in earth-shaking controversies, and embarked on crusades, reforms and renewals. Yet, there are still precious few of us willing to risk everything on the gospel of grace; only a minority who stagger about with the delirious joy of the man who was once deaf and mute. While he disobeyed Jesus on one level, he was absolutely obedient to Christ on another level. In his uncontrollable joy, this man went out to the highways and byways announcing to beggars, cripples, the broken-hearted, the lonely, and the excluded a banquet where in the depth of your soul you are fed forever.

Fr. Phil