

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Can’t Keep the Secret”

The woman was a recent widow and the loss was still very deep for her. She and her husband had been married a long time and while she understood things were going to be very different for her moving forward it was hard for her to imagine life without her spouse. As we talked she said, “I know it’s crazy but I keep calling our home phone.” “Oh?” I said, “You’re calling your own house?” “Yes.” she replied, “I call my phone because he recorded the message that plays when the answering machine picks up.” And then she said, “I just have to hear the sound of his voice.” I immediately understood what she was feeling and it didn’t seem crazy to me at all. Our voices are part of what makes us who we are. Our words are the extension of what we value, what we hope for, what we love. What we say and the sound of our voices as we say it connects us to each other. Just the sound of the other’s voice can bring us into their presence.

This morning we are not reading from the Gospel of John but if we were and if we started with the opening verse we would read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1) And then, just a few verses later we would read, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” (John 1:14) The creative power of God is deeply connected to the voice of God through all the scripture. This is obvious right in the beginning of everything when we turn to the Book of Genesis and the opening story of creation. In the beginning God called everything into being, not by waving some cosmic, magic wand or by forcing some kind of supernatural event. No, the bible tells us God speaks, “Let there be light; and there was light.” (Genesis 1:3) God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered...let the day be separated from the night...let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures...let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind...let us make humankind in our likeness...and it was so,” the bible says. It’s the voice of God that brings everything into being. It is the voice of God I’m inviting us to listen for this morning and especially the way God’s voice speaks to us through Jesus. He is the One who is the fullest expression of God’s creative power, the One in whom, the bible says, the Word becomes flesh.

This morning we are reading from Mark’s Gospel and it is the word of Jesus in today’s passage that brings healing to the man who could not hear or speak. When we come to the stories of Jesus like this one we refer to them as miracles. They are just that, events we can’t fully explain, healings where broken people are made whole. There’s nothing wrong with describing what Jesus did in the man’s life as miraculous but for our purpose this morning let’s think about it in the way the bible does. Jesus embodies the creative Word of God. When he speaks it’s more than just a way to communicate. Jesus’ words express God’s power to bring new life into being. Before his encounter with Jesus the deaf and mute man lived in a sort of communication blackout. He couldn’t hear. He couldn’t talk. This silence in his world cut him off from his community. The technology available to us and the techniques we use to help those with handicapping conditions were not available back then. The deafening silence in the man separated him from the people around him. Jesus healed all of that. With new ears that could hear and with a new tongue that could speak he was able to have a place in the world that was not possible before. It was a miracle but it was more than that. Jesus brought God’s creative power to the man’s life and this made him whole. The gospel says that all of this happened because Jesus spoke a word. That word was, “Ephphatha.” Ephphatha is a strange sounding word to us but when Jesus spoke it something wonderfully life-giving became possible for the man. I want to come back to the word “ephphatha” in just a bit but before I do there’s a backstory to our reading today that is essential to hear in order to grasp the fullness of the new life Jesus makes possible.

In the passage Mark tells us that Jesus has traveled into the territory of The Decapolis. We already know that what Jesus says is extremely important but it is also important where Jesus says it. He has gone into the area of The Decapolis. What was that? The Decapolis was a collection of ten towns outside of the Jewish territory. This means it was Gentile land. The Decapolis was thought to be a dangerous place by the Hebrews and not so much because of physical threats but because of spiritual dangers. The unclean people lived there. The spiritually corrupt cultures were in the Decapolis. When Jesus goes there he is risking the purity of his faith should he associate or come into close contact with those deemed to be spiritually unclean. Again, what Jesus says when he heals the man is important but so is where he is when he says it. This is the point in the story when we can pull some things together. Jesus has broken through the border of what was acceptable. Healing isn’t just for a select group. God’s power isn’t available just to those who live within a certain territory. In fact, wherever Jesus goes he carries the Word of God to bring life. If there is any part of our world or any part of our lives that we assume is outside of God’s capacity to bring transformation we aren’t listening to fullness of the gospel. The man seemed to be without hope but his silent and isolated world was not his destiny. Jesus is with the man and Jesus speaks to the man, and the

result brings the man from the outside into God's community. I've said this the place in the story where we can pull some things together in our thinking. There is no place in us and no place around us that is off limits to the Word that is Jesus. It may feel like a miracle but making every part of us and our world whole is exactly what God can do.

The word was "Ephphatha." I want to come back to this. "Ephphatha" is an aramaic word that means "Be open." This past Wednesday a new season of the Pastor's Bible Study began. We talked about how strange the word "ephphatha" sounds and one of our group commented that it sounds a little magical. "Ephphatha," not exactly "Bibbity, Bobbity, Boo" we said but still strange sounding nonetheless. We learned that Jesus used the language of the man's culture. It's a small but important detail. Jesus didn't speak to the man in Hebrew. He spoke Aramaic. Jesus spoke out of the culture and context of the man so that his specific life would be made whole. In the way God spoke in the beginning of creation so, too, does Jesus create new life for the man. "Be open," Jesus said. And it was so. His ears and tongue were opened but there was more. His life became opened. The man's silent world was gone. He was open to connecting to others, open to sharing who he was with others, open to experiencing God's power working in him in a wonderfully new way.

When the healing was done Jesus said to all who were in the house with the man, "Don't tell anyone what has happened." Why the secret? Why open a man's tongue and then tell him and others to be quiet? In the gospel, Jesus speaks God's divine Word most completely, most powerfully, and most faithfully through the event of the cross. The man's ears and tongue were opened, his relationships were opened but it wouldn't be until the cross that the man's life and our lives are open to the greatest healing of all, a life that is everlasting. The gospel lets us in on this secret. The cross is God's greatest Word and we don't have to be silent about it anymore.

Church, is there any part of our lives that is closed off? Are there any part of us that is silent in the sense that we are cut off from relationship, even a deeper relationship with God? Christ has given us the Word. No barrier to true life, not even the boundary of death, can cut us off. Everything is opened in Christ, even the grave, and because God has spoken that word of resurrection we shall live.

I began with the story of the woman who longed to hear her husband's voice in the midst of her grief and sadness. For those of us who knew and cared about her our prayer was that she would hear God's voice, a voice that could heal her heart and dry her tears. This is the prayer we have for ourselves and for one another that what God says through Jesus will give us life. Listen for God this week. God is speaking, in our sadness, in our joy and in everything we do and say. Open the ears of your heart to the good news. Christ has died and Christ has risen. Hearing that, trusting that, and believing that heals all our wounds.

Thanks be to God. Amen.