

Sermon 9 September 2018
Isaiah 35:4-7a; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

During the symposium on contemplative prayer that I attended last month we were divided into small groups that will be our more intimate companions on our two-year learning experience, that part of our intentional journey of faith. We share email messages now and then, and meet quasi-face-to-face on *Zoom* for an hour twice a month. We met for the second time last week, and it was my turn to be the facilitator.

The meeting is designed to follow a pattern. At the heart of our time together we consider a question or two about how we are doing with our commitment to contemplation; how we spend contemplative time alone, in community, and in the world as a result of the commitment we have made. In some ways the meeting reminds me of the early Wesley Class meetings that the early Methodists held every week. They met to see how each was doing. It was a way to look out for the wellbeing of each individual and to nurture the health and vitality of the church. It was a time for accountability and encouragement. One of the questions they asked was *"How is it going with your soul?"*

In a few minutes I want to ask you to consider one of the questions we asked in last week's *Zoom* meeting. First let's turn to part of this morning's readings from Mark and James.

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Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.

Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."

It is a curious scene—certainly a life-transforming event in the life of the man who is healed of his deafness and speech impediment. The early church embraced this story as part of its baptismal ritual. When they came to faith in Jesus, their ears were opened to hear the good news of God's saving love, and their tongues were freed to speak the good news. The gift of salvation comes through hearing the word, and

the work of salvation comes in sharing the word in speech and in acts of mercy and justice. This prayer is still part of the baptismal ritual in the Catholic Church. As the priest touches the ears and mouth of the infant he prays,

“The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.” Notice that Jesus takes the man aside, away from the crowd. We may first hear the word during a worship service or during a Bible study—but the full power of understanding is released when our spirits meet one-on-one with the resurrected Jesus. Few if any of us will see Jesus walk through a locked door like the first disciples. Few if any of us will be struck down by a blinding light like Paul on his way to Damascus. But all of us can find our way into a still, quiet place where, in the silence, the Spirit of Christ works to deepen our understanding and to change our hearts.

In silent prayer we intentionally make ourselves available to God’s loving and transforming Spirit—Jesus touches and opens our ears, and touches and gifts our tongues with words of grace for the world. In solitude and silence, with Jesus, we pray, *“Help me to hear as you hear, to understand as you understand, to speak as you speak, to see as you see, and to love as you love.”*

Make the time, and let Jesus take you aside from the crowd of your pressing duties and responsibilities—let him take you to a place of deepened understanding and passion. Let him heal whatever impedes you from living your full and free life—to be free from fear, fully alive.

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With his customary bluntness, James writes to members of the church who have failed to hear the word of God’s love and grace. Jesus made it clear from the beginning of his ministry that God is not partial—not a respecter of persons. If God has any bias it is in favor of the poor and disadvantaged. Jesus spoke to anyone who would listen, but he radically turned to the marginal, the outcast, and the damaged people he met. He ate with sinners.

The congregation that has captured James' attention somehow missed that point in the stories they shared. Too many congregations and individual followers of Christ continue to miss that point. Ask yourselves the question. If your favorite actor or athlete, or your most revered public figure came to our church this morning, would you treat him or her differently than you treat the random stranger who slips into one of the pews at the back—especially if that visitor is unkempt or clearly going through a hard time? Maybe you suspect the stranger is really here for a handout—not with the uncomplicated intent of the well-heeled celebrity in our midst. Be honest now—don't mute your true feelings. Would you stand in line to meet the famous visitor during fellowship? Would you stand in line to speak with the disheveled, suspicious stranger?

Anyone who has spent time with Jesus, away from the crowd where comparisons thrive—comparisons between the appealing and the unappealing, the winners and the losers, the rich and the poor, the famous and the infamous—anyone who has had Jesus touch their ears and tongues in private, understands his answer to that question. The spiritually wise among us would greet our visiting hero—maybe with a wave from the end of the line—but we would go to the stranger in the corner to find out who she or he is, what story they have to tell, what gift they have to give, what need they bring to the community where mercy lives. In all likelihood, according to what we've been told, we might very well meet Jesus himself in the person of the stranger.

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There is something beautiful about the community James yearns for—a community of people that refuses to show partiality to anyone, a community that treats everyone with equal respect and affection—a community where the poorest and the richest, the wisest and the simplest, sit together in mutual affection and respect—in the presence of the risen Christ. It would be the beautiful community.

In the beginning of my thoughts this morning I said I would share a question from my *Zoom* meeting last week. Here it is.

In what way or ways is attention and openness to

beauty

part of your practice of contemplation?

After several minutes of consideration, each of us shared our thoughts. Several spoke of the beauty of nature—of sitting and looking or walking through a park, by a river, or at the beach—watching a sunset or a sunrise—and being touched by the sheer beauty of creation.

One person spoke of the beauty of a sunflower. I recently read an article by Joan Chittister who spoke of the powerful beauty of a single flower. This is what she wrote.

The meeting place for our session in Tokyo was through the double doors to the left of the elevator. I was not surprised to find the elevator padded with brass-studded leather. The fact that the carpet in the corridor was thick and soft seemed usual enough.

The real surprise, however, was that beyond the heavy oak doors, the meeting room was not the average conference room. There was nothing in this maroon and gold-draped room but one needle-nosed red celadon vase that held one fresh yellow rose.

One rose in one vase on a glass table in the middle of a room draped in red and gold velvet.

Nothing but pure mindfulness, pure reverence, pure life. This room, you had to think, had been built for this one vase and this single rose. The stark attention, the sentinel awareness, the utterly concentrated focus on one rose steeped the room in the consciousness of beauty.

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The members of our Learning School group continued to share our thoughts on contemplation and beauty. Some spoke of the beauty of music—two of our members are dedicated musicians who experience God in their performances—and in their preparation to perform. They speak of a depth to music—a mystical quality of sound in the cadences of creation. Clearly, Jesus has touched their ears and tongues.

We spoke of the beauty of children—a beauty I am privileged to experience every Sunday morning with your children. There is beauty in every human face for those who have eyes to see—for those whose eyes have been opened by Jesus.

One member of the group took us to a fresh place to see beauty. A member of his family is severely dysfunctional—tragically bipolar and difficult to take care of, even be with much of the time. He spoke of the moments when her beauty broke through the mask of her disability. Another member shared from a book he had read about a Japanese perception of artistic beauty—the willingness and ability to see beauty in the most unlikely places—in brokenness and decay. Is it possible that beauty exists almost everywhere for those who see?

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My thoughts this morning return to the simple prayer I shared a few minutes ago.

“Help me to hear as you hear, to understand as you understand, to speak as you speak, to see as you see, and to love as you love.”

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That seems like a good place to leave it this morning. Jesus wants to touch our ears and our tongues, our eyes and especially our hearts—so that we might begin to live our lives in the grace and wisdom of the presence of the living God. It is the place of beauty where we all are loved and honored.