



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

SEPTEMBER 9, 2012
THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Why Did Jesus Sigh?
James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

Jesus sighed.

He stood there, his hands on either side of the man's head, fingers lightly touching the ears which had not heard anything for years. He was aware of the heat of the man's breath on his chest and could feel him trembling against his touch. He realized that he knew nothing about this man—not even his name—other than he was deaf and could barely talk. How many other heads or hands or hearts had he touched in order to heal them? How many of those people did he remember? Had he ever seen any of them again? Once they had received what they wanted from him, where did they go? What did they do? Did they even remember him?

As he gazed up into the heavens, his hands upon this man's head, a thousand faces flashed through his mind. Deaf men and sick women, blind men and crippled ladies, children with seizures and lepers with no hope, demon-possessed women and men, folks of all sorts with illnesses of every kind had come to him. They all wanted one thing—to be healed. Who could blame them? Is that not what everyone wants: to be healthy and whole and not have to depend on other people or be a burden to family?

Jesus sighed. He was tired, he knew that. He thought about how he had tried to get away for a few days alone. That is all he wanted: just a few days to rest and relax without people constantly asking him for something. A friend in Tyre had even offered him a room, but his plea to tell no one that he was there was ignored. No sooner had he stretched out on the bed to take a nap than a knock on the door brought him face to face with a feisty woman whose daughter was sick. His mind fogged in that delightful moment of falling asleep, he had rudely suggested that his God-given gifts were reserved for his own people first and that she could come back later. But she was feisty and passionate and determined to get help for her daughter. She reminded him that “even the dogs under the table (as he had so crudely referred to her and her daughter) eat the children's crumbs” (Mark 7:28). It was like splashing cold water in his face and woke him up immediately. Surprised and

embarrassed, Jesus had stuttered a blessing and told the woman that her daughter was healed.

He smiled to himself, remembering her and her vicious love for her daughter. He had felt a kindred spirit with her. But what of the others he had cured, he wondered? What had they done with their lives? After getting what they wanted from Jesus, had they gotten the message of his gospel?

He remembered the crowds which gathered every time he entered a new town, clamoring for his attention, begging to be healed as if healing was his only gift to offer. He recalled that nightmarish evening at home when the gang of people outside his door interrupted supper and demanded that he come out and heal their sick friends. He thought of the crowd fed on the hillside and how fascinated they had been with the way he had blessed their food. Were they more interested in food for the body than nourishment for their souls? Images of the Pharisees, his perennial thorn in the flesh, took shape in the clouds above, taunting him, challenging him, mocking him, and plotting against him at every turn.

Jesus sighed. He was so tired. Physically he was exhausted, but he was also weary in spirit. When he had set out to tell people the Good News of who God really is and what God wants them to do, he thought they would receive it enthusiastically. He expected people to talk about what it means to be a follower of God, not swap stories about how he had cast out demons. He believed people would be overwhelmed by the forgiveness God offers instead of being wowed by how many people could be fed with a little bit of effort and a lot of prayer. He had hoped that the people he met would be so transformed by what he told them about God that they would change their ways, become more compassionate, demand righteousness, and live peaceably with one another. Instead, they argued over who was greatest among them, jockeyed to get the best seats at the table, and debated who was most favored by God. He shuddered as he admitted to himself that some of those people were the ones who spent the most time with him.

A sad sigh slipped past his lips as he remembered how angry the people in his hometown had been when he suggested that God was bringing his kingdom into reality in their midst. He recalled how he was run out of town after he had run the demons out of the man they called "Legion" and into the pigs foraging nearby. He shook his head to think about how quickly cheers for a miracle could turn into jeers for his departure when he called for healing of their hearts and minds. He was weary to the core but there seemed to be no rest.

Jesus sighed as he wondered how people steeped in the traditions of their ancestors could ignore the meaning behind those traditions. He puzzled over how anyone could hear the scriptures read and yet ignore the meaning they held for life. He marveled at how unwilling his closest disciples were to spend a little time thinking about the parables he told. He was tired of having to explain to them over and over what the Gospel was about. What part of love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength could they not understand?

Jesus sighed, then remembered where he was and what he was doing. His fingers still touched the leathery ears of the man before him, ears that had never heard a daughter's voice or the song of a bird. Long locks of the man's hair fell over Jesus' hands, damp from the heat of the day and gray from the worry and abuse that were a part of a disabled person's life.

"What would this man do?" Jesus pondered. Would he be like so many other people and shake Jesus' hand, kiss him respectfully on the cheek, and run off to resume his little life with no thought of what his healing might mean? "Does he even know who I am?" Jesus wondered. "Am I simply another miracle worker tramping through the countryside, another sideshow of magic and mystery looking for an audience? Does he think of the prophecies? Does he connect the dots? Does he know that the hands of God hold his head?"

Jesus sighed. He felt the trembling beneath his hands grow stronger and realized that the man was praying. Words he could barely understand tumbled out with a passion that spoke clearly of this man's faith. Jesus looked again into the heavens and instead of angry, selfish images, he saw the faces of men and women, boys and girls lit up with a hope they had never before felt. He saw the little girl, almost a woman, Jairus' daughter, getting up from her death bed and hugging her parents with full vitality. He remembered the woman in the crowd whose faith had reached out to touch him, believing that his power could heal even in secret. He thought about Legion, the frightening hulk of a man who had menaced a community for years. Freed from all the chains that bound him in body, mind, and spirit, he could not wait to tell other people about what Jesus had done for him.

So many times he had begged people not to go around reporting his miracles, knowing that the crowds begging for help would just grow larger. But they could not help it. They had been sick and were well. They had been shunned by their communities and were welcomed back. They had been locked in darkness or silence or sickness and now they were free. How could you expect someone to keep silent about such good news.

And he remembered all those people who had come to see him. He knew that a lot of them wanted to be healed physically, but he also knew that many of them wanted to be healed in their hearts. They listened to what he had to say. They asked questions about his interpretation of the prophets. They were eager to learn about this new understanding of God that was more gracious than vengeful and more compassionate than frightening. They wanted to learn about God's demands for righteousness that resulted in abundant life for all people. He knew that they enjoyed a good picnic, but recognized that they were also hungry for justice and righteousness.

The faces of so many grateful, devoted, eager followers passed before him. He knew that God was passing the Gospel from him to them and that they would make certain the Good News would continue to be told and lived. With minds and hearts opened, they would continue to learn and grow in faith just as he had.

As his own spirit brightened, Jesus heard the man sigh. "He's wondering when I will ever get around to healing him," Jesus laughed to himself. He thought how this man's life would suddenly change. Not only would he be able to hear the voices of his children and friends, he would be able to hear Jesus preach. He would hear the prayers offered in the synagogue and the scripture read. And he would be able to speak. He would be able to tell other people what wonderful things God had done for him. He would be able to share the Gospel. He would remember Jesus and tell people about him for long years to come. He would help open the hearts and minds of other people who also needed the healing grace of God. He would help change his community and make evident the Kingdom of God in their midst just like many other people whom Jesus had touched.

Jesus sighed, but this time it was a sigh of contentment for he knew that the Gospel would live in this man and so many other people. He looked to the heavens, summoned the power of his faith toward this hopeful man, and whispered, "Ephphatha!" "Be opened!" he shouted to the world . . . and all creation sang with joy. And the man heard and rejoiced!

So may we all. Amen!

September 9, 2012

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of creation and renewal, of power and vulnerability, in your infinite wisdom and love, you fashioned us from the dust of the earth and revealed yourself in the substance of our own flesh. You invite us into conversation and accompany us on our journey of life and faith. You call us to examine our words and actions in light of the life and ministry of Christ and, by your grace, enable us to be transformed into his likeness. You guide us safely through the storms that arise and promise that the floods of life will not overwhelm us. And in the midst of whatever we face, you call to us, "Do not be afraid, my child, for I am with you." For your protection over us and your presence with us; for your truths that challenge us and your grace that accepts us; for the gift of brothers and sisters who are companions on this journey and your call to befriend the stranger; for every good gift which comes from your generous hand, we offer to you all that we have and all that we are and lift our hearts in gratitude and praise.

But we confess, O God, that it is easy to be open to you when the news is good and our faith is strong. It is easy to entrust our lives to you when answers come and your work among us is apparent. So we ask for the faith to seek you when we feel alone or defeated, when the needs are great and the resources are few, when your call to serve stirs our hearts with compassion but our energy is depleted and our perseverance is waning. Where there is suffering, help us to bring comfort. Where there is need, move us to respond generously. Where there is violence, teach us to be messengers of your peace. Where there is loneliness, enable us to be present. Where the shadows of doubt and hopelessness seem to reign, give us enough light to illumine our own path and to dispel the darkness for another. In all things, O God, be for us what we need and what we cannot be for ourselves.

In the name of the Christ who showed us how to love by first loving us, we offer these and all our prayers. Amen.

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