

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“(Jesus) entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.

Yet he could not escape notice...”

Today I thought I might talk a little bit about the common labor of all Christians.

One of the sad realities of ministry,

of doing the Lords work,

is that it is exhausting.

It is exhausting to our hearts and minds as well as our bodies.

I’m pretty sure that is why this wonderful story with the Syrophoenician woman

is in the Gospel of Mark.

Mark wanted every new Christian to know what they were getting into.

And let me be clear,

I’m not talking about the work of an ordained minister,

but the work of every Christian.

Loving the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,

and loving your neighbor as yourself

is not easy.

It really takes it out of you.

And like most things that are difficult,

left to our own devices, we often try to take the easy way out.

It’s so easy to get lazy.

You can tell as the story begins

that Jesus is tired.

He wants to get away,

have some time alone.

He needs a sabbatical, or at least a little sabbath time.

In this Gospel story, among other things, I think Mark is trying to make a point.

He is reminding us that when done well,

the ministry that Jesus is doing,

and that Jesus expects us to be doing as well,

will tire us out.

Will interrupt our routine.

Will push us beyond our normal limits.

And you know what?

That's inconvenient.

It's bothersome.

And so we look for wiggle room.

With the best of intentions we compromise our efforts.

And soon, we get lazy.

Little by little our hearts become hardened and they close.

It seems in this story,

that even Jesus is susceptible to this human failing,

at least at first.



In the portion of his letter that we heard this morning,

James the Evangelist is taking the church of his own time to task

for forgetting the full extent of the law;

for getting lazy.

Time has passed from the event portrayed in our Gospel this morning;

the Letter of James was most probably written

in the late first century, or early second century,

but still it appears, people are people.

It's not that they were ignoring the poor.

I'm sure they were helping those in need around them.

They probably ran a soup kitchen

and donated to the local homeless shelter.

The problem was that they were treating the poor differently;

seeing them as different from themselves... less than themselves.

It is such an easy trap to fall into.

I know that.

At one of my previous churches, St. Charles, on the fourth Thursday of every month

I got the chance to test myself against that trap

when I went down to Trinity Church in Aurora, IL

for the Sandwich Board soup kitchen.

I'd like to say that every month I passed the test,

but that wouldn't be the truth. I wouldn't be human if I did.

In addition to helping out at the Sandwich Board soup kitchen,

St. Charles would hold a free spaghetti dinner every month

for the community in St. Charles.

On the one hand they are both free food for whoever shows up,

but every month I was struck

by how different the two communities looked in my eyes,

and how very much the same they looked in the eyes of God.

Though we all saw clearly the difference between the two crowds,

we did our best to treat them the same.

Both meals were made with joy and served with love,

but still they were different.

That is what James is all fired up about.

If we don't see the difference and work to correct that difference

then our faith dies and has no power to save us.

Here at Grace we do what we can.

We maintain and support Josie's Pantry.

We support the Samaritan Center

with food collections and financial support.

We serve meals monthly at the Salvation Army shelter
and collect food for their pantry.

We volunteer and financially support Common Ground.

We volunteer and provide food for The Room at the Inn,
as well as support them financially.

We are taking part in Project Homeless Connect this year.

In short, I think we are doing ok,

but we can always do better; not more, but better.

Much of our outreach is accomplished by a small group of dedicated people.

It is time for all of us to step out even more boldly.

I think James is reminding us to remember the interior work

that will both inform and perfect our outward good works.

I don't want us to just come to church regularly,

I want us to be the church in the world.

I want the true light of the Gospel to shine in you, in all of us,
and to shine out through us,

like a lighthouse shines on a dark and foggy night,

for I am afraid we are living in dark and foggy times.

I know, I know,

I'm beginning to sound like the people

that brought the deaf mute to Jesus for healing.

But I can't help it.

Like them, I have seen what the Father's love,

Christ's forgiveness, and the Spirit's power

can work in peoples lives.

It is awesome.

But awesome isn't always the big things.

More often than not it is the little things:

a gentle touch, a compassionate word, or an understanding ear.

Did you happen to notice that the miraculous healing of the deaf mute,
that we heard about in this mornings Gospel,
was accomplished by Jesus
with just a few simple touches,
a look, a sigh, and a word.

Those simple actions revealed an awesome authority.

And it is an awesome authority that we too have been given access to;
the authority to heal the hurts and woes of the world.

In our baptism we receive this authority
as we receive full membership in the body of Christ.

But with that authority comes responsibility as well.

The responsibility to live up to the image in which we were created,
or as we say in our baptismal rite,
to grow into the full stature of Christ.

Make no mistake.

It is an awesome responsibility.

If we are to be the body of Christ in the world,
and I believe we are,

then it will be our hands that will need to do the work
to reveal the kingdom of God.

Your hands and my hands.

There is plenty of work to go around.

Open your eyes to see with the compassion of Christ.

Look around for something to do,
someplace to help,
someone to work with.

Some inspiration.

Get involved.

Step up to make a difference.

Take this opportunity to not only come to church,
but to begin the awesome task of actually being the church.
To be the body of Christ alive and active in the world.
Let our prayers empower the work we do,
and let our works give life to the prayers we pray.
As Christ spoke to that deaf mute so many years ago,
so he speaks to us today.

Ephphatha!

Be opened.

Opened to new ways of ministry,
ways you may have never thought of before.

Opened to new opportunities
for community and fellowship.

Opened to new life and new vigor
in the everyday pursuits of life.

Opened to a new life in Christ.

It will not be easy,
and because we cannot do it alone,
I ask for the help of our heavenly Father.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

We come together today to pray as a congregation;
Yet each of us is strangely solitary in Your presence.
Each of us comes before You with special hopes
and dreams;

Each of us has our own personal worries and concerns.

Each of us has a prayer no one else can utter;

Each of us brings praise no one else can offer.

Each of us feels a joy no one else can share;

Each of us has regrets which others cannot know.

And so we pray:

If we are weary, give us strength;

If we are discouraged, give us hope.

If we have forgotten how to pray, remind us;

If we have been careless of time, forgive us.

If our hearts have been chilled by indifference,
warm them with your mercy.

In all that we do this day,

open us to your will as we experience it through your Son,

and inspire us with the fire of your Holy Spirit.¹

Amen.

¹Adapted from "Inspire Us" p. 21 Likrat Shabbat, Media Judaica, Bridgeport, Conn.