

**Christ Episcopal Church**

**2 Emerson Street**

**East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855**

**Sunday, September 9, 2018**

**Proper 18 (B)**

**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**DRAFT**

**“Taking our fingers out of our ears”**

**8 AM and 10 AM Sermons**

**by the Rev. Joe Parrish**

**The Holy Gospel**

**according to Mark 7:24-37**

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she

answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He 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.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Dear Lord, give us ears to hear your voice and to hear the voices of all whom we are to love and care for. Amen.

“Be quick to listen and slow to speak”, the evangelist says in the letter of James 1:19, but also in Verse 22 the same writer says, “be doers of the word and not hearers only”.

What is the formula for ‘give and take’? Generally, we are ‘playing it by ear’, not really knowing when we should be listening and when we should speak,

and oftentimes we get it quite backwards or distorted. Maybe we want to assert our will or our own ideas or our own peeves, and that makes us less ready to hear the other, and that may pertain even particularly to the ones we love most dearly. I am pretty sure that ‘give and take’ often is not taught us, we sort of ‘pick up’ the way our parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends did of do it. But to analyze whether we are effective or not in our communication may not be innate in our human nature. Our effectiveness in communication may

depend on how we learned to communicate. But apparently what many of us often may not do particularly well is...listen, really listen to what the other person is saying or wanting to express. And our relationships may suffer because of our inability or unwillingness to listen, and that inability or unwillingness to listen may negatively affect even our own very close personal relationships.

My own experience in learning how to ‘actively listen’ was taught to us when we were summer chaplains during

seminary. Who would have thought we were not good listeners when we were in our twenties and thirties? Well, it seems most of us are not that good as listeners, but we can indeed be taught how to listen. But how many school classes are there in listening? I hesitate to say, but I expect the numbers of listening classes or courses are very, very limited. And most only learn listening by taking professional courses in psychology. But most all of can learn how to be better listeners.

A deaf woman pastor, Rev. Elizabeth von Trapp Walker, wrote about her experience as a deaf person (quoted in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 66, 2005, Pages 312-313). She said, “Let me tell you what God has done for me in my “defective” state. He has created me with ears that hear what people REALLY say, for in my intensity to hear I listen not just with mechanically assisted hearing, I listen with my whole body. My eyes see the joy, pain and sorrow sometimes hidden in the words as the ears of my heart listen and read the

body language of the speaker. I look and see the whole person as they speak because this defective person God created must use her whole person to hear them. I am totally present to another in my strain to listen. I do not believe this would be the case if I had been born whole and without blemish. These are gifts and talents that I have, and I have them because I could not hear! Ergo my deafness can be looked at as a gift from God!”

But Reverend Elizabeth Walker is also probably telling us with ‘normal

hearing' that we can be hearing only what our ears hear and not what our eyes see or what our hearts and souls may be experiencing. Our helter and skelter lives may be causing us to 'skim over' some very important parts of life that God may be presenting us, something we are particularly being called by God to do, something that only we may be able to do for someone in need, physically in need or emotionally in need. But God does give us the power to learn if we choose so.

My own personal experience after taking a chaplaincy course in ‘active listening’ was that my wife said to me, ‘you’ve become a better person’. Wow. I was still me, but suddenly I had become a ‘better person’ in the eyes of my wife to whom I had been married for many years. Wow. That was eye opening. And it was because I had learned in my chaplaincy course how to listen more effectively and by putting all my senses and my mind to use. We often separate listening from communicating, and in today’s world,

the art of texting is often the way we communicate thoughts, but we are reliant on the available emoji's to express what we are feeling or what we are trying to express with a few strokes of letters on our cell phones. But we moderns are often overlooking the importance of direct face to face communication, of heart to heart listening, and we are poorer for it.

But we say. 'life is short', and cover our shortcomings with an ineffective emoji. Then there is the cell phone: have you not seen someone angry with

someone else shaking their fist and screaming into their cell phone? Ten years ago we would have been called lunatics, fringe, and so on, and perhaps we still are a bit. ‘Why is that person screaming into their hand?’ we would have asked ten or twenty years ago, wouldn’t we? What terrible thing did that hand do to us anyway?

I watched a group of four twenty or so year old’s at lunch with each other. None were looking at the other, and all four were intently engaged in some dramatic texting to someone else miles

away. But they felt comfortable that they all had the same issues of communication, effective communication in their lives. And hopefully they did know each other's hearts, but the precious time together was possibly being a bit wasted by the 'lure of the text'.

Jesus was trying to get others to respond to the presence of God with them, to listen, when they wanted to be the talkers, the demanders, the need-ers, and even the heal-ers.

To the woman from Tyre Jesus was possibly telling her to treat her daughter better, not like she would treat her dog. To the ones who brought him one who could not speak or hear, Jesus took the deaf person privately away from their worried presence, so Jesus could effect a healing miracle which the deaf person's friends possibly would not have believed had they been privy to what Jesus was doing. Sometimes the result is what we need, not to see how the result is brought about. Have you never been amazed by new technology? How on earth can a fax

machine work, I wondered years ago. But faxes do indeed work. Sometimes we just need take the work of God and even of well-meaning humankind on faith, not having the mind or power of God, who can do far more than we can wish or even desire.

May we begin to hear more with our eyes, may we interpret more with our hearts, and may our own ears be opened.

Amen.

Description: Ears may not hear, and eyes may not see, what wonders God has in store for those who really listen for God's voice.

Tags:

Ears, eyes, heart, Jesus, God, active, listening, closest, deaf, touch, watch, see, hear, learn, friends, emoji, text, cell, phone, hand, speech, speak, listen, deaf, mute, heart, wife, parent

**St. John's Episcopal Church**

**61 Broad Street**

**Elizabeth, New Jersey 07201**

**The Fourteenth Sunday after**

**Pentecost:**

**Proper 18 (B)**

**September 10, 2006**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish**

**The Holy Gospel according to**

## **Mark 7:31-37**

Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He 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." And immediately his ears were opened, his

tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Heal our listening and let us hear your voice in our ears, Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

This miracle story about Jesus has a "euueee" part, Jesus spits and

apparently puts the spittle on the deaf mute man's tongue, similarly as he does a few verses later in Mark 8:23 when Jesus heals the blind man by spitting on his eyes. Some have speculated that this was a part of some Jewish healing ritual, but no clear conclusions have been drawn other than that Jesus got 'down and dirty' during some of his healings. He however did get the deaf man to a place of privacy before he did this, as he also did in his miracle for the blind man he healed in Chapter 8, a few verses later. He apparently did not want the

healings to be a public spectacle. He was pretty obviously not trying to bring attention either to the deaf mute or to himself.

Tomorrow at 4:30 AM in the wee morning hours a few of us volunteer disaster chaplains have been assigned to go down to Ground Zero with the Red Cross for the annual 9-11 service of remembrance there, along with our compatriots in the Red Cross mental health corps. Our job will be to provide a spiritual and pastoral presence for the spouses and relatives of those 2,800 who

perished there five years ago. But we will be with these spouses and relatives in small groups in two private closed tents before they come out to the platform to read the names of all the deceased as the service of recollection is broadcast over worldwide television.

Whatever healing presence we may be able to offer those grieving ones will be in the relative quiet of those two small white tents that have been erected there. The challenge of bringing an air of calmness to this rather emotional situation is significant. And the need for

the presence of God has actually been rather officially realized, in my opinion, perhaps for the first time in these annual 9-11 observances. In other commemorations we just stood back some blocks away and gave out bottles of water and packets of tissues to the families passing by on their way to the observation area and down to the pit.

I still recall the pit when it was the “pile” in the fall of 2001. My first day there as I recall was October 8th, a Monday, about three weeks into the recovery of remains when I first got

permission to go there from the New York City Police Department. My job, unofficially of course, was “to get them organized down there”, the police inspector told me, as he handed me my official private pass and identification badge at the Javits Convention Center several blocks north of Ground Zero. I had been working since the evening of 9-11 with all the injured patients at St. Vincent’s Hospital—“Trauma One”-- who had been rescued by the real heroes of 9-11, the fire, police and emergency personnel who perished along with the

others that fateful day. What still amazes us was the miracle that not tens of thousands of people were killed, but only about 2,800. The buildings' downstairs evacuation routes were amazingly effective, at least below the 91<sup>st</sup> Floor of Building One, and below the 78<sup>th</sup> Floor of Building Two. The higher up escape routes had been cut off by the crashing jets and their burning fuel. The emergency lights in the stairwells were all on that day, the stairs were unencumbered, the emergency doors all worked, quite unlike the "drill" in 1993

when the bomb was exploded down in the basement of the World Trade Towers. And due to that failed bomb attempt, many in the two tall towers had been alerted to the fact that evacuation was the only safe way to survive; and their wise public criticism of the escape routes saved thousands of life in 2001 by getting those emergency staircases and lights and doors working and open.

However, there had been some greed there also, as companies had capitalized on the somewhat lower rents and demand for space on the higher floors after 1993

and had moved higher into the tremendously tall buildings. The result however was that whole companies or divisions of large investment and insurance companies were completely wiped out. Their employees were the ‘cream of the crop’ in the New York financial and trading economy, many of the upper middle class were trapped there that day. I have estimated the total annual earning capacity that was sacrificed on 9-11 could have annually fed and housed about a hundred million people elsewhere in the world, the

average incomes were so high. So the overall impact was far greater than the numbers of people may appear to be.

And these were “good” people who died that day. The first person whose recovery I witnessed that day and whose body I blessed was a young high-ranking Latino corporate lawyer with a wife and two young children who had been a Scout leader and a coach for his kids, a pillar of a community here in New Jersey. And there were many others. They were trustworthy folks. Many of them sacrificed their own lives that day

getting their more junior employees evacuated before they tried to leave, which in many instances resulted in their being too late to make it out, the towers fell so fast. To the question, “Were they the greater sinners?” Jesus would have undoubtedly said, “No”, just as he did when someone approached him about a large group who lost their lives in the fall of a Jerusalem tower during his time on earth, as recorded in Luke 13:4.

I recall an earlier time when my own ears were opened, it was perhaps both a symbolic and a spiritual opening

actually, as it turned out. After my second year in seminary in 1985 I think it was, I was admitted to the Clinical Pastoral Education summer class in Goldwater Memorial Hospital. We were about seven or eight chaplains in training there that summer. I recall getting a physical examination in the hospital as we were being “inducted”, and the doctor found and removed a piece of cotton that had found its way deep into the auditory canal of one of my ears. It had apparently been there for quite some time, but I had never noticed my hearing

was diminished. Later that summer we were taught “active listening”, a way of hearing “between the lines” for the patients we were caring for there—most all the patients in that special hospital were either paraplegic or quadriplegic, paralyzed and unable in many instances to move more than a few feet or a few millimeters in some cases. Oftentimes the patients were on 24 hour 7 day a week constant ventilators, and their voices were concomitantly weak and soft, and sporadic; some could only speak in-between ventilator cycles. So

listening itself was a challenge, but listening for signs of fear, panic, and distress was almost a life or death situation. Can you imagine having your life hanging on the next compression of a ventilator motor? So, they were very dependent patients, very dependent on the constant watchful eyes of the nurses, the doctors, and the technicians. If any breathing device was out of service for more than four minutes at a time, that would be the end of them. So back up equipment and continual surveillance was the norm rather than the exception.

We chaplains learned rather quickly how to pick up on emotional states, and as we gathered experience and expertise, we became better and better pastors for the patients. But it was always the challenge to our hearing, and mine was not the most acute at the beginning, but I learned and got much better. So even though none of us chaplains in training were hearing challenged, especially after they took the cotton out of my ear! We were always trapped by our own deafness to the patients' needs and feelings unless we carefully listened to every inflection

of voice, every motion of hands and body, every facial movement. It was quite a learning curve for all of us.

A deaf woman pastor, Rev. Elizabeth von Trapp Walker, wrote about her experience as a deaf person (quoted in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 66, 2005, Pages 312-313). She said, “For me one of the most transformational moments was in struggling with the words in Psalm 139:13-14, that reads, “For it was you [God] who formed my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you for I am fearfully

and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works.” Chaplain Elizabeth Walker continued, “I would ask God, how? How could I be fearfully and wonderfully made if I were less than whole? Why did he knit me together in my mother’s womb and forget to give me perfect hearing? And on and on....I would shake my fist at God... Do those words only hold true for those who are born free from defects of any kind? Does this then mean, that I was not fearfully and wonderfully made, that somehow God messed up? Am I less

than whole, damaged goods, and somehow not so loved by God because of this?...Have I personally suffered as one who is deaf in a hearing world? Yes, and with great intensity. Is that suffering because I was malformed by God in my mother's womb? Is my suffering God's wrath? Unequivocally, NO! The majority of my suffering has stemmed from ongoing insensitivity of the hearing world, the cruelty of children during childhood, and the loneliness of functioning in our hearing world. God did not mal-form me in my mother's

womb. Let me tell you what God has done for me in my “defective” state. He has created me with ears that hear what people REALLY say, for in my intensity to hear I listen not just with mechanically assisted hearing, I listen with my whole body. My eyes see the joy, pain and sorrow sometimes hidden in the words as the ears of my heart listen and read the body language of the speaker. I look and see the whole person as they speak because this defective person God created must use her whole person to hear them. I am totally present to

another in my strain to listen. I do not believe this would be the case if I had been born whole and without blemish. These are gifts and talents that I have, and I have them because I could not hear! Ergo my deafness can be looked at as a gift from God! Which leads to a more sense of wholeness and positive self-esteem? Feeling proud and positive that God knew EXACTLY what he was doing in creating me, that I am precious in his sight and fearfully and wonderfully made, just as I am? Or that I will never quite measure up because I can't hear,

that I am less than whole, and certainly not fearfully and wonderfully made?

[Elizabeth von Trapp Walker, “Is Disability a Gift from God?”

[http://www.satcom.net/mariposa/gift\\_or\\_nov.html](http://www.satcom.net/mariposa/gift_or_nov.html), August 23, 1999 (accessed

November 25, 2001)] Roger Carver of the Deaf Community Christian Church responds, “Deafness is just one of the variants of normal human life. The factual reality of created life is that there are differences among people, as regards strengths and weaknesses, differences that have nothing to do with good and

evil, being less or more human as differences in color of skin and eyes, physical beauty, or gender. The cause of suffering does not lie in these differences but in the cultural prejudice that again and again relates individual differences to good and evil or to the value of human existence.”

But of course, Jesus was pained that the nature of birth had caused distress in the deaf mute man brought to him for healing; Jesus himself sighed and prayed to heaven over the man’s quandary, and with a spoken word of command, he

challenged the forces of nature to “Be opened”, to open the man’s listening ability, to let him hear so he could praise the God and Father in heaven along with the rest of us. And suddenly the man could hear and speak clearly. Did he have the voice of our choir guests here with us today from St. Petersburg, Russia? I don’t know. But he probably could raise his voice in praise much like the rest of us who only have “below average” to “average” voices. Yet we delight in the beautiful praises we hear in another’s language; we don’t understand

the words, but we revel in the  
compassion and spirit and feelings we  
hear. We are deaf in a way, but yet we  
do hear! God has opened our ears and  
has made their praises of God's Son and  
of God's heavenly and peaceful kingdom  
intelligible to us all!

Thanks be to God! Amen.