

Pentecost 14B – Proper 18B (9/6/09 – Ephphatha ... Be Opened)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

The mother of the little girl had *an anxious heart* [ISA 35.4]. Her daughter had *an unclean spirit* – she was demon-possessed [MK 7.25-26]. We don't know what the symptoms of this possession were – unlike the case of the boy we shall hear about next week. All we know is this mother's anxiety. It didn't matter that Jesus wanted some "down time" – to be hidden from the demands of the crowds ... even for just a little while. She came right into the house where Jesus was and fell down at His feet. Need can make you that way – humble ... and desperately seeking God's compassion.

But this woman had more than need. All people have need, whether they recognize their need or not – their **real** need ... especially their **spiritual** need. This woman was not only needy, but also trusting. She had faith that Jesus – a Jew ... a foreigner to her ... a foreigner whose people generally despised her – she had faith that Jesus **could** and **would** heal her beloved daughter from this oppression.

In fact her faith is so very strong that even when our Lord seems to say, *NO*, she determines that in the end He will surely say, *YES*. It matters not what she may be likened to – even a dog [7.27, 28]. She believes the words of the Psalmist. *Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God ... the God Who lifts up those who are bowed down* [PSA 146.5, 8]. So to our Lord's apparent denial, she responds: *Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs* [7.29]. Or, to re-phrase the words of the Psalmist who says: *I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness* [PSA 84.10], this anxious mother's response is basically: *I would rather be a dog under the table of the Lord than sit at the table of unbelief*. She will trust the Lord ... and receive only crumbs, if need be.

And what is our Lord's final answer? *Because of this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter* [7.29]. Jesus does not simply say: *Go in peace*, without giving her what is needed [JAM 2.16]. He faithfully works and graciously grants her God-pleasing request. *And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone* [7.30].

What about **our** faith? Is it like this woman's? Or when our hearts become anxious, do we simply despair – like those who have no faith? Is it not the case that our faith is quite weak ... and that we too easily become anxious? That the slightest delay in the Lord's response to our prayers we interpret as a resounding and **permanent**, *No*? What would we do if the Lord responded in like manner to us: *Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.*? Would we answer, like this woman: *Yes, Lord; yet even the*

dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs!? Or would we sulk away with our tail between our legs? Whimpering for a time ... then perhaps becoming a little bit angry with God – indeed, perhaps even more than just a little bit? Isn't that how we all too often behave in the face of what seems like an “intolerable” delay in our Lord's answer to our prayers – even if the delay is only momentary?

The second portion of our *Gospel* is the account of Jesus healing the man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Once again we see that it is those who care for the person who take the initiative to bring the need before Jesus. This is an example that we should follow. We are to *fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”* as our *Epistle* puts it [JAM 2.8]. And elsewhere God's Word urges us *that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people* [1Ti 2.1]. Let us, then, pray diligently for those in need – especially those who are outside the faith ... and those whose faith may be in jeopardy. Let us be like loving mothers and caring friends to bring the needy before our gracious Lord and Savior. We are all too often negligent in these duties. It is the sad case that on the one hand we are anxious about those things that should not concern us, while on the other hand we have no anxiety – no care – whatsoever about the very real (and eternal) needs of those around us.

Now, whereas in the first account Jesus heals the daughter of demon-possession simply by His Word, in this account our Lord speaks His Word together with visible signs and actions – *He put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue* [7.33]. Note well, dear Christians, that your loving Savior is not afraid to touch your infirmities. Indeed, He has borne them all in His Own body [ISA 53.4; MT 8.17] – along with all of your sins – on the Cross. This action should not astonish you, in one sense – how could He Who took on the weakness of your mortal flesh not also take into Himself your infirmities? And yet, this action should constantly astonish you: that your God should descend – and deign without disdain – to touch that and take into Himself that which is contrary to Himself ... that which has come only as the result of sin in the world and in your life.

And looking up to heaven, [Jesus] sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” [MK 7.34] Notice again, dear saints, the great compassion of your Savior! He doesn't just pray. He doesn't just command. Jesus sighs! Your Lord sighs – because He knows what this man has suffered. Your Lord sighs – because He knows what **you** suffer. Your Lord sighs – at the great and pervasive damage that first and original sin has caused in His beloved creation. He sighs – like that little girl's mother must have sighed a thousand times when seeing her daughter tormented ... frustrated that she could not help. Your Lord sighs –

because this is not the way He created us: to suffer such impediments ... to suffer sin ... to suffer illnesses and pain ... to suffer death.

But mark well that this is **not** the sigh of one like us who is unable – or only barely able – to help. This is the sigh of compassion ... and divine mercy ... and eternal love. The Savior's sigh is the sigh of the One Who knows your impediments, infirmities, and sin – even more thoroughly than you know and feel them yourself. The Savior's sigh is the sign of the Lord your God, Who can and will help **all** of your impediments, **all** of your infirmities, and **all** of your sin ... including your death.

With a divine sigh your loving Savior says, ***“Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”*** ***And his ears were opened, his tongue released, and he spoke plainly.*** [MK 7.34-35] There is no delay as in our so-called “man-made” cures. No need to wait for results. No need for physical – or in this case, speech – therapy. With a sigh of compassion and love the Holy One of God opens ears and they hear. With a sigh of compassion and love the Son releases tongues and they speak. And your Savior is still doing that today – indeed, right here in this place ... even now.

With a sigh Jesus says, ***Ephphatha ... Be Opened*** – and your ears are opened to hear of your own sin. With a sigh Jesus says, ***Ephphatha ... Be Opened*** – and your heart is opened to repent your sin ... and for the moment your heart is anxious. With a sigh Jesus says, ***Ephphatha ... Be Opened*** – and your tongue is loosed to confess your sin ... and your heart is still anxious. You cry out with the Psalmist: ***To You, O LORD, I call; my Rock, be not deaf to me ... Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy*** [PSA 28.1, 2]. And then with yet another sigh Jesus says, ***Ephphatha ... Be Opened*** – and you hear the sweet sound of the Gospel. Your sins are all forgiven for the sake of Him Who shows no partiality, but came and suffered for the sins of **all** that He might be your Rock and Strength and Shield and Saving Refuge. Your heart is no longer anxious. Rather it ***exults, and with [your] song [you] gives thanks to Him***, saying: ***Blessed be the LORD! For He has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy.*** [PSA 28.7, 6] And your tongue proclaims, ***“He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak”*** ... and sinners into saints!

So I say to you today ... to you who have an anxious heart because of your afflictions, your infirmities, and your sins: ***Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.*** [ISA 35:4] For behold, the ***vengeance*** and ***recompense*** is NOT the punishment you deserve for your sins laid on you, but the sighful compassion of the God Who already has come and saved you eternally by laying your sin and punishment and death on Himself. And He ***will come and save you*** again – when He brings you

safely into heaven. And on the Last Day He will speak His one last *Ephphatha ... Be Opened*. Then the graves of the saints will be opened – just as the tomb was opened that Easter Sunday morning – and you will be raised up ... exalted ... into the very heavens ... soul **and** body. And then you will truly be *astonished beyond measure* ... when you behold your God and Savior in all His glory!

In the Name of the FATHER and of the + SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]