

A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Edwin Smith for Proper 18, The Season After Pentecost, Year B
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You have heard me say before that sometimes I do not understand why those who put together our lectionary chose the verses they did. That is certainly true of this morning's Gospel.

Each of the very distinctly different stories of our Gospel lesson stands well by itself. The story of the Syrophenician woman who pleads with Jesus to deliver her daughter from a demon is followed by the story of a deaf man who could not speak clearly.

Now, the first story is important because in it Jesus opens the door to gentile followers.

Some people think his use of the term, "dog," is strong language. In actuality, the word he used is not the same as the one used to describe the wild dogs who roamed the streets looking for garbage.

Or the word the Jews used to describe gentiles. Rather, it is more like describing a house dog, a lap dog, if you will. Still not a term of equality with the Jews, but not nearly so strong as our meager language implies. It was a term the woman would have understood to have a much softer meaning.

The distinction is important. In those days, people did not have knives, forks, and spoons. They ate with the fingers, tearing off bits of meat and chewing them. It could get quite messy. Their habit was to wipe their hands on pieces of bread, which they then threw to the household dogs to eat.

The woman's reponse to Jesus indicated she understood the implications of what he said and that she had faith in his power to drive the demon out of her daughter. Recognizing that, Jesus granted her request. She returned home to find her daughter healed.

In the second story, people bring a man to Jesus to be healed from deafness. Interestingly, Jesus takes the man away from those who brought him, thereby preserving the man's privacy and dignity.

He touches the man's ears, spits and touches the man's tongue, looks up to heaven and speaks the word "Ephphatha," "be opened." The man is immediately healed of his deafness and is able to speak clearly.

Notice that Jesus looked up to heaven. Surely the man would have understood that the power of healing came from God.

Then, Jesus ordered those present to tell no one about this. He had done so on other occasions, as well. Of course, no one obeyed his instructions on this matter.

Jesus told those present at his miracles not to tell anyone for two reasons. First, he was not yet ready to reveal who he was – the Messiah.

Second, he did not want people coming to him solely because of the miracles he performed. The miracles were always performed out of compassion, not as a means to attract attention. That is an important thing for us to remember.

Suppose St. Thomas became a place where healing miracles occurred on a daily basis. (now we have experienced miraculous healings here, but not on a daily basis). But suppose we did. Word would get out.

Soon people would come from all over, not only to be healed, but to see miracles, to be entertained.

Would that be a good thing? Well, yes, in some ways. But, few if any would come to hear the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Lives would not be changed.

Years ago, when I was in college (that would make it fifty plus years) a few of my fraternity brothers and I went to hear a “healer.” We went out of curiosity, since his style was not something with which we were familiar.

He was just beginning his ministry on a large scale. He later went on to have a TV show. He drew a crowd in the thousands to the arena in Milwaukee that night.

It was very dramatic, with careful lighting and staging. Finally, the lights went out. Then a single spotlight came on and out from behind a curtain, the healer appeared. He spoke briefly. He spoke loudly, too. Then people came forward. He laid his hands on them. Canes were cast aside, crutches dropped, wheelchairs abandoned.

And I might add that several collections were also taken! A great show.

But, no one heard the message of salvation through Jesus Christ that night.

Real healing – healing of the soul – lasting healing – comes through hearing and accepting salvation through Jesus.

The tragedy of that occasion is that most of those present, with the exception of those who came for healing and the ones who brought them, came to see a miracle – to be entertained.

This is what Jesus was trying to avoid. Yes, his healings, his miracles, were something to see. But it was his message that he came to give.

Remember how grateful the Israelites were when Moses parted the red sea? And how ungrateful they later became wandering in the wilderness?

It makes one wonder how many of those who saw the miracles of Jesus, or even of those who were fed or healed, stood in the crowd that demanded he be crucified.

Our work is not to perform miracles. Our work is to spread as far as we can, as often as we can, that salvation and eternal life are available only through Jesus Christ. And that is the greatest miracle of all!