

# From the Pulpit of Trinitarian Congregational Church...

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Powerful Listening

Sermon on Mark 6:1-13

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Some have said that to be known, to be understood is every human being's greatest desire. It's frustrating not to be known. But how frustrating is it to be known so well, that you are essentially not really known at all. This is one of life's paradoxes, and it is a paradox we find in our Scripture today. Who you are now (or who you have become, as in the case of Jesus) is totally eclipsed by who you were in the past or who people perceive you to be. Their perceptions of you, perhaps based on a particular incident or a distorted memory of you leave no room for any newness, any freshness, any new possibility or change at all.

Think of the classic picture of a wife with her husband: she with a desire to be appreciated and noticed, loved in a fresh and unsullied way, he with his newspaper, video or football game, waving her out of the way.

Think of a child, coming home from school excited with a picture he's drawn or a story to tell of a victory in gym class, out on the playground or a test score he studied long and hard to achieve. The mother, distracted, worried about something or just deep in thoughts of her own life and concerns, says something like, "Oh, yeah, that's great, honey," then mindlessly changes the subject.

There are countless stories like the one we just read in Mark. Jesus had just returned from a very successful road trip. Last week we saw the opposite of this week's scripture. Remember we had the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. We saw the twelve-year old girl being brought back to life. News of this stuff traveled fast. Of course people were curious about miracles. Everyone is interested in that. But from the hometown boy from Nazareth? From Jesus? Son of Mary? (Notice: not the son of Joseph, questionable birth is referred here.) So Jesus had a reputation that preceded him. He had what you might call an "already always listening" to contend with, with the people. But Jesus was still Jesus. He was still the Son of God. He was still filled with Spirit. He was still the embodiment of wisdom and spiritual authority. What was missing?

Remember the hemorrhaging woman? Remember how she strained and stretched to merely touch the hem of the Lord's garment? What would you call that? Faith? Desire? Lack of inhibition? Belief? It almost needs a new word. Let me tell you one:

Ephpatha. It's Aramaic. It is the word that Jesus used when he healed the deaf man by the river in Mark 7: 31-37. . He put mud on the man's ears and said, "Ephpatha," which means, "Be opened." There was nothing "wrong" with those who could not get their minds around Jesus being the Messiah from his hometown. Nothing wrong, except they could not get past their "already always listening" of who they thought him to be. And so they missed out. And so Jesus showed up for them the way their listening (already, always) fashioned him.

Barbara Brown Taylor has a metaphor for this. It was like Jesus lit a match, a match that was as bright as any he lit anywhere else. But he was lighting a bunch of wet sticks. There was no way that bunch of sticks was going to catch fire. Ephpatha. He said the words but there were no ears to hear him. They were not open nor were they willing to be open. You and I have already, always listening of each other. We keep one another in boxes and we cannot show up as any way except in the listening we have for each other.

So Jesus leaves. He sends the twelve out beyond the familiar, beyond the relatives, the extended family, beyond those who think they already know him and those who represent him. He says, take nothing with you. Trust you will be taken care of. Stay where you are welcome, don't "hop around" looking for the best accommodations." Take the message OUT THERE. Don't depend on your good looks, your education, your personality, your fame. Depend on God. Do as I tell you. This good news is not to be confined to a building, a synagogue, the home of a well-to-do and well-known mover and shaker in the community. Teach and preach where there are hearts open to receive. Ephpatha. Tell those and heal those to whom those words will matter. Make a difference in the hearts willing to receive.

At first I was frustrated that these two stories occurred together. Then I realized that the listening that Jesus had for the twelve disciples was directly opposite of the listening that his hometown had for him. They listened him powerless. They listened him familiar. They listened him ordinary. Jesus, on the other hand, listened the disciples as capable. He listened them (or perceived them) as powerful. They showed up accordingly. You and I have no problem thinking about someone being a powerful speaker. But being a powerful listener is perhaps even more important.

Many of us have been "Christian" all our lives. Many of us could just turn on our cars

on Sunday morning and put them in drive and they would know where to go. But do we think we know Jesus so well that he cannot teach us anything new? Do we think we know each other that God cannot speak through one of us to bless us and move us deeper into relationship, not only with one another but with Christ himself? And do we think that we are so familiar with God, with his church and his teachings ... that we cannot be shown anything new at all? Ephphatha.

This is an unmiracle story. This is a story that shows us two very important things: 1. Each day we have the opportunity to see others, as well as ourselves, newly. (Walter Matthau story?) We must be willing to see those with whom we have much history as though history can be re-written. And be willing to see those with whom we have no history as possible friends and brothers and sisters. This is an openness that can transform the world of prejudice and bigotry. Jesus was viewed with prejudice and therefore could not do his work! No one can heal you or me or anyone else until and unless we open our hearts, our ears and our eyes to something new. I cannot do my job effectively until and unless you are willing to be opened to something new and see even me newly. Your wife or your husband or your teacher or your friend cannot be to you who they truly CAN BE until and unless you are willing to see them through unclouded eyes. Ephphatha. Be opened.

Number two is the message must go out. You and I can drop the baggage of our prejudice, our judgments, our limitations, even our standards of the way things "ought to be." We can go out among the people, spreading the good news with just our listening of one another. Not even saying a word. You and I, after having been open to and touched by the message of Christ are to now go out and be the message itself. Through our actions, through our listening, through our willingness to take risks and show the love of Jesus in everything we say and do. That is why He told the disciples not to take fancy equipment. In the Message it says, don't think you need a lot of equipment for this. You are the equipment. You are the equipment, my dear people. Amen.