

“Speak”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
16th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18B) – 8 & 9 September 2018
Mark 7:24-37

Jesus needed a break. Over the past several months, he’d kept up a withering schedule of travel, and along the way, he healed the sick, cast out demons, miraculously fed a crowd of thousands, taught wise parables, sent the disciples off on their maiden missionary voyage, and fought with the Pharisees and scribes more than once. After all he had **done**, Jesus needed some time to simply **be**.

We don’t tend to think of Jesus as someone who got tired like we do, but he was just as human as we are. When we’re worn out, Jesus knows how we feel, because he experienced it. That feels good, to be understood, especially in our hard-driving world where sometimes we’re made to feel guilty for taking the rest we need.

So Jesus went to Tyre, a city in Gentile territory, a place where perhaps not so many people knew who he was. “He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he did not escape notice.” The word had spread from Galilee to all the surrounding country, even making its way into non-Jewish lands.

Here was someone like none other; a man endowed with extraordinary power, capable of making broken people whole. He inspired hope. Jesus tried to keep people quiet about his works of wonder, but in their excitement, they couldn’t stay silent. In their joy, they shared with everyone what Jesus had done for them. People flocked to him wherever he went, and we can’t blame them reaching out to Jesus.

So he was torn from his short-lived solitude by a Syrophoenician woman desperate for help. Her daughter was possessed by a demon. Her little girl was trapped in her own body by an

evil presence devoted to her destruction. We can hardly imagine how that mother felt, but I'd drive a gas truck through hell for my children, and there's not a parent in this room that wouldn't do the same for their kids.

That's why Jesus' response to her hits us hard. He called her a dog, told her that as a Gentile she wasn't worthy. He needed to focus on the children of Israel. Apparently, there wasn't enough miraculous power to go around. It's offensive and surprising, definitely not the Jesus we thought we knew. But then something astonishing happened.

She didn't say, "Who do you think you are calling me a dog?" which is what I imagine most of us would have said. Instead, she replied, "OK, so I'm a dog, but even the dogs are allowed to lick up the crumbs spilled on the floor by the children." She didn't let her pride get in the way.

Her desperation and her belief in the power of Jesus led her to convince him to change his mind – the only time in any gospel where Jesus did so. Her determination, anchored in the unshakeable faith that Jesus could help, caused him to expel the demon from the little girl, sight unseen. "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter."

His cover blown, Jesus then went to the Decapolis, a cluster of ten cities full of Gentiles. The people there brought him a deaf man with a speech impediment, begging for help. Jesus immediately healed him, and people went wild with amazement. Again, "Jesus ordered them to tell no one," but they couldn't help themselves. How do you keep something like secret?

If a gas station was selling premium unleaded at 80 cents a gallon, or if a store was giving away the newest iPhone for free, we'd call our family and friends and post the good news to social media.

When I was a little boy, I had a speech impediment. My “r’s” and “l’s” came out as “w’s.” Gwandma told me to pick thwee qwawts of stwabewwies.” I called it “Elmer Fudd Syndrome.” It took two years of hard work with a speech therapist to fix that, and I’m grateful. But if somebody had untied my tongue in a matter of minutes, you’d be sick of hearing about it, because I wouldn’t be able to stop telling the story.

Yet we often stay silent about Jesus. Why? Are we controlled by the taboo against talking about religion and politics at the dinner table? Are we afraid of been seen as that obnoxious religious nut or of getting into an argument with someone who holds different views? Maybe we worry that we won’t be able to hold our own, or that broaching such a sensitive topic might damage a relationship, or – God forbid – we might need to revisit or even revise our ideas in light of something we might learn from somebody else.

We’ve all been there. I’ve done it countless times. Two hours of polite, stimulating conversation over a nice meal, with all topics of real substance safely locked away. Nobody likes to be mocked or deal with a blowhard who thinks the volume of their voice and the crudeness of their words lends force to their opinions. But in the process, we short-circuit healthy public discourse, and much worse, we do to Jesus what he couldn’t manage in Tyre: hide him away where nobody can find him.

The time for keeping the secret is over. He’s risen from the dead, the greatest miracle of all. Of course, how do even start talking about that? Some think they don’t know the story well enough, but most know the story better than they think. How do we insert the topic into a conversation in a graceful way?

Well, there’s no grand strategy. I’m sorry. There’s no playbook, and even if there was, that wouldn’t be authentic. Giving witness is different for each of us. We’ve got to feel it out,

experiment, learn from what doesn't work, and celebrate what does. We need to be less embarrassed and more shameless, because the difference between sharing the Gospel and keeping it secret is life and death, for us and others.

We worry a lot about "Where are all the people?" especially the young people. Why aren't they here? Why don't folks flock to Jesus the way they once did? Could it be that our silence says faith doesn't really matter? It's easy to see how someone could get the impression from our silence that faith is a nice hobby for people with the time and inclination. But if it were a life-changing experience, people wouldn't be able to stop yapping about it. Since most folks don't talk about it much, then obviously it's no big deal.

Contrast that with way back when. Jesus told people to keep their mouth shut, but they were on fire. People in Gentile places, like Tyre and the Decapolis, knew who Jesus was and sought him out confident that his mercy and power would change their lives in a way that no one else could. When's the last time we brought someone to Jesus, like the friends of the deaf man did?

When have we spoken for those who cannot speak for themselves? The deaf man didn't ask for healing, because he couldn't. His friends came before Jesus and begged on his behalf, because somehow they knew that Jesus came for everybody, even for that Syrophenician woman he initially rejected.

Jesus came for everybody: rich and poor; young and old; well-educated and uneducated; sick and healthy; powerful and weak; Republican, Democrat, liberal, conservative, you name it. Jesus shows no partiality when it comes to the hope for salvation. He came for everybody: of every language and skin color; the lawful and unlawful; the kind and the cruel. Jesus came for everybody.

Yet many people do not know this or cannot believe, because it seems too good to be true. There are those who once believed but have fallen away. Some label them as lazy or too preoccupied with the busy-ness of the world, and for some who have strayed from the faith, that's true. But for many more we, the Church, bear responsibility.

There are the bruised who were squeezed tightly by a very narrow-minded, doctrinaire, controlling expression of the faith that neglected the freedom Christ brings. There are the burned scorched by constant threats of hellfire and brimstone that neglected the grace Jesus gives. And there are the bored – and the Episcopal Church bears special responsibility for this crowd – who were exposed to a lukewarm, milquetoast, uninspiring experience that led them to the logical conclusion, “What’s the point?”

To the bruised, the burned, and the bored, Jesus sends us to serve as agents of healing and reconciliation. To the bruised, we can offer imagination. To the burned, we can offer mercy. To the bored, we can offer excitement. And to us, Jesus says, “Ephphatha. Be opened.” Open hearts, open minds; open ears to listen; open mouths to “Tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love,” an old story, yes, yet ever new – vibrant, thrilling, real.

In this work, we receive and share peace. In this work, we come closer to Jesus and stir others to reach out for him. In this, we are blessed with wholeness and find true rest – relieved, forgiven, and freed.

Shall we stay silent, or shall we speak? Jesus and the world are waiting for our answer. Amen.