**Text**: **Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

 **Pastor Roger H. Black**

September 9, 2018 – 16th Sunday of Pentecost On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org/)
 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

 **Theme: “Healer of Our Every Ill”**

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

 Laura had been abused at an early age and the scars that were left on her body were left on her mind as well. For this reason, she had not spoken for twelve years. Still, the psychiatrist who treated her, Dr. Richard D’Ambrosio, did not give up on her. Week after week he would quietly talk with her, trying to get her out of her ever-present autistic behavior. Finally, after months without hearing a sound from her, the doctor decided on a new course of treatment. He brought three dolls to the session to demonstrate something that might have happened to Laura as a young child. **First**, he acted out the doll baby crying. **This led to** her parents (represented by two adult dolls) trying in vain to quiet her. **Then**, frustrated with quieting the doll baby, the parents began to fight. **The Mom** began to hit the doll baby. As she watched this scene acted out, **suddenly Laura stood up**. Swaying as she stood, eyes wide open and face contorted, Laura **crushed the mother doll** with her right hand, then grabbed it from the doctor and began to pound it over and over with her fist. Then she suddenly yelled, **“No! No! No!”** The doctor tried to calm her, saying: **“It’s all right, Laura. It’s all right. Don’t worry now.”** Eventually she did quiet down. This turned out to be a breakthrough in healing for Laura. Afterwards Dr. D’Ambrosio wrote in his book No Language but a Cry: **“Laura could speak! Her eyes were living, but now her mouth was open, and words came out. At that instant it was for me the greatest single sound I had ever heard. Together we had succeeded in conquering the illness.”**

 Sometimes, healing comes dramatically, like with Laura. In today’s gospel we have two stories of Jesus healing people, but they are told a little less dramatically. In the first, an outsider woman (a native of a foreign land) has faith and confidence in Jesus as the Healer, and it leads to her daughter being healed. In the second, a man’s friends intercede for him, asking Jesus to break the silence their friend has suffered for a long time. He is also touched, perhaps unexpectedly, with healing power. His ears are opened and his previously inarticulate words come out of his mouth loud and clear. “God blesses both of them with the “healing of their ills.”

God is the “Healer of every ill.” This title from a hymn that became popular seventeen years ago on 9/11 still speaks to us today. When maladies get taken care of, God is behind it. But how does God’s healing usually come about? In our gospel text it takes place through a connection between Jesus the Messiah and people seeking help. A person who trusts in Jesus, from modern day Lebanon, approaches him, desiring help for her little daughter who has an unclean spirit. The Mom does not expect any preferential treatment, demonstrating this by getting down on her hands and knees, begging him to heal her daughter. [You can see this well portrayed on the front of the bulletin] At first Jesus refuses, saying that His healing power is prioritized for the Jewish people. In the words of The Message He proclaims: **“Stand in line and take your turn. The children get fed first. If there’s any left over, the dogs get it.”** But this woman is unfazed by Jesus’ put off. She replies: **“Of course, Master, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."** All that she wants for her daughter (and her) is leftovers. All she wants is, what we might call, “crumby grace,” (crumby with a b), a small gift from God. She looks up in trust with an open hand and heart. In view of her hanging on to the promises of God, Jesus recognizes her great faith. He says to her: **“Since you approach me as you do, as you go home, you will find that the demon has left your daughter.”** And sure enough, upon going home, she experiences Jesus’ healing grace as “good to the last drop!” She discovers that “even the crumbs of grace are powerfully healing!”

Healing takes place through the intercession of friends for one particular friend with need for healing. Some friends approach Jesus to get help for a man who is deaf and who cannot speak clearly. This time Jesus uses healing means—He puts his fingers in the man’s ears and some spit on the man’s tongue. Then Jesus looks up in prayer, groans mightily, and commands, “*Ephphatha!*—Open up!” At once his ears and mouth are opened. Dramatically, like Laura in No Language But A Cry, his whole life is changed. He can now participate in public worship and communicate socially. Jesus’ healing changes his whole life.

The healing of these two persons celebrates Jesus being the Messiah. As Isaiah in the Old Testament lesson for today prophesies, “When the Messiah comes, the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”

These healings also raise some questions in us. We certainly know from experience that healing does not always happen, at least in this world. If we fail to be healed, or our loved ones are not healed, we often ask “why.” As my Bethel series trainer, Pastor Robert Wise wrote, we often encounter “Mr. or Mrs. Why,” the questioner within us who seeks fairness. “Why does God not always answer our prayers for healing positively? Why is someone else healed and not us?” Ultimately, since we are human and not God, we will not be able to answer these questions. We simply must hold on to our belief that even when healing doesn’t happen, God offers us final and complete healing in God’s grace. “God is good all of the time.” God does not want us to suffer. There is a mystery to God’s ways, we do know that often God does bring about healing. And, we know that the best way to respond to God all of the time is with faith.

When we think about our approach to God, we can well ask the question that Martin Luther posed to his children when he taught them a Bible lesson: “With whom do you identify in these stories?” **[PAUSE]** I think that **“I often feel like the woman asking for help and healing for her loved one. After all, very humanly I often have prayer for help for my family member. Still, at other times I feel like the man who cannot hear or speak clearly. I don’t always listen well. I cannot always hear what is being communicated to me. I often find myself needing to speak more slowly or more distinctly so that others can understand me.”** How about you? Where are you in the story? Regardless of your place, it is good news for us to realize that God can be the “Healer of Our Every Ill.” There are no limits to God’s love. God can even touch the lives of those who we consider outside of the community of faith with healing in some way.

God can bring about healing in a corporate body, such as a church, as well. Bethel Lutheran Church has been on a walk in the wilderness—without a regular lead pastor-- for almost two years. Like trees going through the seasons of life, some moss has grown and some bark has rubbed off during this time. There have been some challenges to people’s faith. But we still know that God has been working here to bring about healing and wholeness. God has helped leaders create new structures or leadership and growth. So we trust that God will bless Bethel with the best new lead pastor for the future of the church. We may not see the way forward right now, but God is not bound by our sensory deprivation. Just as God transforms individuals, God can transform the church, in ways that we don’t fully understand. God can say to us “be opened,” and we will be opened!

The outsider, the woman from Tyre or Sidon—like a Viking fan to a Packer fan—is a model of faith that receives healing for her loved one today. For our part we need to have the same kind of expectation of faith that this woman had… to have an open hand, longing for just the crumbs God provides.

We need to hold on to hope for healing in our lives, and work toward that end…to work for change and growth in a world where we are tempted to give up hope. Healing and hope will lead us to caring action on. That is really the message today in churches across the country in the ELCA. It is “God’s Work: Our Hands” Sunday. God utilizes God’s people in mission and ministry in the world. In response to God’s grace and healing, we give our hands for God’s purposes, as an exercise of our “living faith” in God. Through our actions this day we reflect that we are alive as individuals, and as a church. As we carry out our seemingly small acts of caring, our ears and hearts are more open to God’s grace, as well as to all people in the world.

God calls for us to distribute our gifts of grace to others. We are to be the prism through which God’s love radiates to the world. We don’t have to be perfect to do this, for “we are all wounded healers.” Nadia Bolz Weber, Pastor of House of All Saints and All Sinners in Denver, Colorado, writes: **“I thought that to be the light of the world, to let your light so shine before others, you have to be whole, be strong, be perfect. That special class of people I'll never belong to. But perhaps this is when we best listen to the words of the prophet Leonard Cohen: ‘Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering. There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.’ In other words, it is exactly our points of weakness, of pain, of brokenness, of insufficiency that force us, like those who originally followed Jesus, to stand in the need of God. To stand in the need of the true light. So perhaps those cracks, made from bad choices, from anxiety and depression, from addiction, from struggle and remorse ... are what lets the light of God's love in. And maybe those same cracks are also how the light gets out.”** Touched by God’s healing love, let us be lights for the healing of others.

“Healer of our ev’ry ill, light of each tomorrow, give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow. You who know each thought and feeling, teach us all your way of healing; Spirit of compassion, fill each heart.”

 Let us pray.

“We do not thank you, Lord,

That we have bread to eat while others starve;

Nor yet for work to do

While empty hands solicit heaven;

Nor for a body strong

While other bodies flatten beds of pain,

No, not for these do we give thanks!

But we are grateful, Lord,

Because our meager loaves we may divide;

For that our busy hands

May move to meet another’s need;

Because our doubled strength

We may expend to steady on who faints.

Yes, for all these do we give thanks!

For hearts to share, desire to bear

And will to lift,

Flamed into one by deathless Love—

Thanks be to God for this!

Unspeakable! His Gift! Amen.