

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle B, 9.9.18

Isaiah 35:4-7/James 2:1-5/Mark 7:31-37

Following Jesus to Parts Unknown

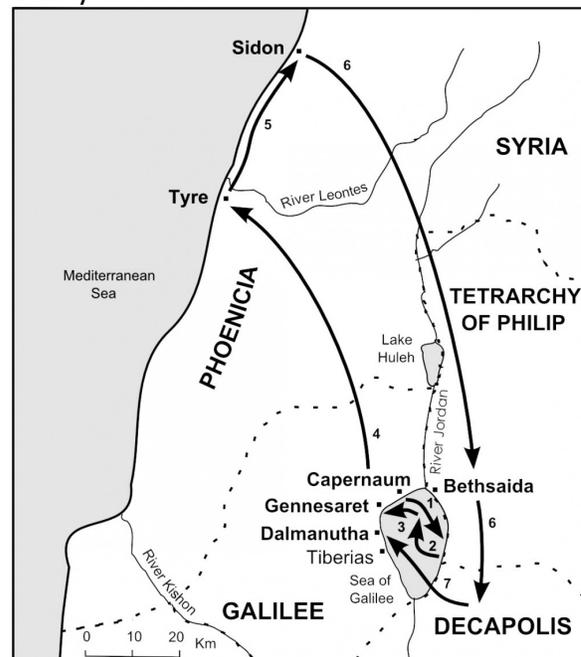
I took a survey yesterday of a few parishioners and asked them: *What food would you never, ever eat?* There weren't too many surprises in their answers – two people said liver, one said Brussel sprouts, another peas (these were responses from adults, not children!) One woman said kale (even though she said she knows it's good for you). I added radishes to the list. One parishioner who lived in Hong Kong for a while said he'd never eat sea slugs or shark lips again. (Myself, I would never have tried them in the first place!) I guess we would not have been good traveling companions with Anthony Bourdain, the American celebrity chef and travel documentarian. In his award-winning TV series "Anthony Bourdain – Parts Unknown" he traveled the world uncovering lesser-known places and exploring their cuisine. His travels took him to exotic places, places off the beaten path, places like Madagascar and Borneo, big cities like Copenhagen, and our own backwater Mississippi Delta.



Every place he went Bourdain exposed his audience to foods unheard of, like "grilled pike heads with beach herbs," "cobra heart," and "raw seal eyeball." He never backed off from trying the native dishes, but, more significantly he never backed off from people. He exposed

viewers to more than food; he showed us how to enter the lives of other people, people who are different from us, people who don't share our social status or religion, our dress or language. His greatest role was connecting with people. Bourdain said: *If I am an advocate for anything, it is to move. As far as you can, as much as you can. Across the ocean, or simply across the river. Walk in someone else's shoes or at least eat their food. It's a plus for everybody.*

In Mark's Gospel Jesus takes his disciples on a travelogue. There's an interesting detail to the opening description of their tour. *Again Jesus left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis.* Biblical archeologists say that this circuitous route would be like starting to go due south by going due north. We might say - "like going from Lafayette to Concord via Castro Valley and 580."

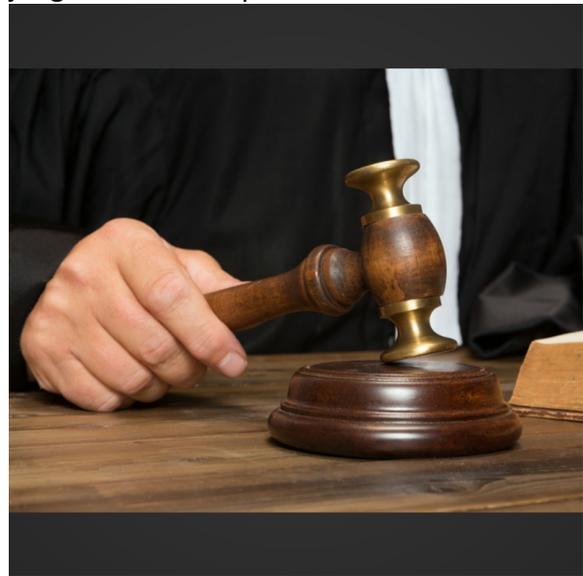


Some suggest Jesus' journey with his traveling companions could have taken months, and this path took them into gentile territory – out of their comfort zone, into foreign lands, among foreign people. Do you suppose that, like Anthony Bourdain's admonition, Jesus' intent was to impress upon his disciples – and upon us – to *move... as far as you can, as much as you can... across the ocean, or simply across the river. Walk in someone else's shoes or at least eat their food.* For Jesus' first followers this would have really been a challenge. They had their dietary restrictions to follow, their rigid religious rules and regulations, their knowledge that they were part of God's "chosen" people -- which left a lot of others on the outside looking in. And here was the Master, breaking all the rules and taking them down paths they never walked before. They were ready in a heartbeat to call down fire on a disbelieving Samaritan village, while Jesus, beating with the heart of a gracious God, was ready to embrace, to forgive, to heal and to unite.



Notice in our miracle story today how Jesus acts with compassion and understanding. *He took the deaf man off by himself away from the crowd.* Here is someone who already bears the burden of physical ailment and the shame, the embarrassment that came with it. Jesus enters the man's silent world, showing the most tender consideration for the feelings of a person for whom life was difficult to bear. What a powerful lesson of discipleship Jesus demonstrated to his followers.

Once a friend of mine was caught short when he discovered that the judgment he was making on a person was horribly false. The reticence that he thought to be aloofness on someone's part was really caused by profound sorrow over a tragedy the person he was judging had experienced many years before. When my friend found that out, his eyes and his ears were opened, and he realized how easy it is to misjudge and to fail to hear or see the truth of a person's life. I was caught short too... because I had made the same false judgment on that person.



The Epistle of James today asks a question which offers us a perspective on all our thoughts about others: *Did not God choose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and heirs to the Kingdom?* If James were writing his epistle today, how would he view the practice of racial profiling? What might he say about policies that permit law enforcement to stop, question, detain and even deport a person based on their ethnic features or name? What would he say about gay bashing, homophobia and hate crimes? How would James defend the poor and what might he say to us wealthy. As long as

we make distinctions among ourselves, we remain hearers only and not doers of the Word. We are, in James' words, *judges with evil designs*.

The gospel of Mark preserves the strange and ancient Aramaic word used by Jesus -- *Ephphatha! Be opened!* Perhaps to remind us very poignantly that we all need to have our ears unsealed, our hearing restored. We still judge one another by appearances, by the standards of the world. We are still not as open to one another as God has been to us. We still miss the presence of God in the poor and the dispossessed, in those who suffer from disease or war or loneliness. We still shun the person of another race, or those who have been shaped by a different culture, or who worship God in a different way. We have yet to put aside all our biases of the past and to be transformed by God's compassion and love.



So the command of Christ still needs to be heard by all of us: *"Ephphatha!" - "Be opened!"* Be open to the example of people who are like living parables and teach us something of the kingdom of God. Be open to the miracles of life that surround you each day. Be open to the possibilities of showing compassion and allowing your heart to grow.

Let me close with a prayer I found – a prayer that invites God to open us, as God opened the deaf man in the Gospel:

*Lord, let me have wider feelings,
more extended sympathies;
let me feel with all living things,
rejoice and praise with them.
Let me have deeper knowledge,
a nearer insight,
a more reverent conception.
Expand my mind until it grasps
the idea of the unseen forces
which hold the globe suspended
and draw the vast sun and stars
through space.
Let me see the life, the organisms
which dwell in those great worlds,
and feel with them their hopes and joys
and sorrows.
Ever upwards, onwards, wider, deeper,
broader,
till capable of touching you
as you have touched us!*

Ephphatha! - Be opened!

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