Sunday, September 7, 2003
LISTENING FROM THE INSIDE
Mark 7:24-37

The many stories of Jesus healing people in the New Testament have two levels of meaning: an outside one and an inside one. The outside level is the physical act of healing. The inside one is equally important. The early followers of Jesus remembered these incidents and retold them as living parables. When Jesus healed a person of blindness, this reminded them that they too could be blind in their own way. When he healed a person who was deaf, it taught them that even though they were not physically deaf, they needed to learn to listen from the inside as well as from the outside. When Jesus healed someone with an unclean spirit or demon, it taught them that they could also be tormented by demons or unclean spirits — the demons of greed, lust, hate, prejudice, covetousness, and/or self-righteousness.

They knew that when Jesus said that he came to give sight to the blind, speech to those who had difficulty speaking, and hearing to the deaf, he meant more than restoring physical sight, speech, or hearing. They knew that when he helped people get rid of the demons that were tormenting them, they too had demons that needed to be dealt with.

Today's scripture reading describes two healing incidents. We are going to see what they have to teach us from the inside as well as the outside. The first story is about a Syrophoenician woman, a Gentile. She had heard about the amazing and compassionate healing powers of Jesus. She had a daughter with an "unclean spirit." She desperately needed help. Even though Jesus had tried to get away from the crowds for a period of rest and relaxation by going into a foreign territory, she found him.

You can identify with his desire to get away. Certainly, there have been times when you have wanted to get away where no one can reach you, but you have found it's not that easy. Any busy mother, overwhelmed by the demands of her children and their constant requests for assistance of one kind or another, knows what I'm talking about. Maybe she seeks the quiet and solitude of a few minutes alone in the bathroom. She is interrupted by a knock on the bathroom door and a little voice saying, "Mommy, he hit me!"

As technology has increased the effectiveness of communication and the transfer of information, it has also increased the degree to which you are constantly accessible. The existence of the "virtual office" has created a situation in which you not only can be reached by telephone, fax, email, cell phone, or palm pilot virtually anywhere on the planet, you are often expected to respond immediately when reached through these methods. People like to say, "It's a small world." I usually answer, "The world is the same size it's always been. It's a more connected world."

A few weeks ago, Rowena and I were driving to Minnesota for a brief vacation. We were traveling on Highway 77, toward Sioux City. We stopped in Uehling, Nebraska, to buy gasoline. Inside the station, a small group of retired farmers in overalls were having their morning coffee. I was wearing shorts, a sport shirt, and sunglasses. Several of the men looked at me, and then one of them said, "I know you. You're that preacher on television that we watch every Sunday morning." The way I was dressed, I didn't think I looked much like a preacher, but they recognized me anyway. I had a nice conversation with all of them.

Several years ago, we were vacationing in Hawaii, on the northern side of the island of Kauai, in the little town of Princeville. We were certain no one would know us there.

We were taking a walk one afternoon, and a convertible pulled up alongside us, and we heard our names called. There were two couples in the car: the one couple, our neighbors from across the street where we live, and the other couple, church members. All of you have similar stories you could tell.

What makes this story of the Gentile Syrophoenician woman so startling is that she was the least likely person to recognize and approach Jesus without hesitation. Yet when you have a mother with a sick child, she can be very insistent. She begged him to heal her daughter. What is also surprising is that Jesus at first refuses her request by saying, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” What could he possibly mean by that statement? The Gospel of Matthew has the same story but with several significant additions. They can help in understanding the story.

Matthew reports that at first, Jesus did not say anything to the woman when she made her request. By not responding initially, Matthew implies that he is testing the disciples to see what they will do. They tell him, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” They are exaggerating a little — there’s no indication she approached them. But they’re confident Jesus will do what they say.

At first, Jesus seems to agree with them. He said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” In other words, “I was sent to the people of Israel, God’s favorites. She’s not an Israelite, so you’re right, she should be sent away. I have no responsibility to her.”

However, he doesn’t send her away but watches the disciples to see how they will respond. Do they understand that God loves all people, even those who have not heard of the one true God? Will any one of them say a word on behalf of this woman?

Jesus tests them again. He said to the woman so the disciples could hear him, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Dogs were regarded as unclean scavengers, little better than pigs. The disciples still do not speak up for her, but she spoke for herself.

I admire this woman. She is persistent. She wants help with her sick daughter. She does not give up. Her response to Jesus is creative. She said, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She will not be refused. Jesus is impressed. Now he turns to her and says, “Your daughter is healed.” And then, in Matthew’s account of the story, he adds, “Woman, great is your faith.” The disciples are amazed. This woman, a person they considered to be an outsider and not worthy of God’s love, someone they consider inferior, has been given one of the greatest commendations ever bestowed by the one they follow so closely.

On the outside, you see, it’s a healing story, and that’s important. The love of God in Jesus can save people from anything that possesses them. Listening to the inside of the story is equally important. God’s love, God’s grace is not exclusive. God includes those you want to keep out. However, none are left out except those who refuse to enter.

The second healing story heard from Mark’s Gospel today also has an outside lesson and an inside one. On the surface, a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment is brought to

Jesus. His friends begged Jesus to heal the man. So as not to embarrass the person, Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and healed him. It was an act of compassion.

Now let's look at the inside meaning of the story. The early followers of Jesus remembered and told this story over and over again because it taught them that they too needed to have their ears opened. Although they were not physically deaf, they needed to learn to listen from the inside out as well as from the outside in. You can have excellent hearing and still be spiritually deaf. You can have good hearing and not hear what God is trying to tell you. You can have good hearing and not understand what others are saying. You can have good hearing and be deaf to the hurt and suffering of others.

Children and young people can have good hearing but pay little attention to what their parents and teachers are trying to tell them. Children and young people can become "mommy" and "daddy" deaf. Parents can become "child" deaf.

Here's an example. A dad notices that his son is depressed and upset. So he says to his son, "Come on, tell me how you feel. I know it's difficult, but I'll try to understand." The son replies, "I'm not sure. You'd think it was stupid." "Of course, I wouldn't think you were stupid," says dad. "You can tell me. No one cares for you as much as I do. I'm only interested in your welfare. What's making you so unhappy?"

"Okay, to tell you the truth, dad, I don't like school anymore." Dad responds, "What do you mean you don't like school? After all the sacrifices we've made for your education. Education is the foundation of your future. If you'd apply yourself like your older sister, you would do better, and then you'd like school. I've told you over and over again to settle down. You've got the ability, but you don't apply yourself. Try harder. Get a positive attitude. Now go ahead. Tell me how you feel."

The young man has nothing more to say. He's now reluctant to tell his dad what's behind his dislike of school. Instead of trying to understand what his son is saying, dad wants to rush in and fix things with good advice before he understands the issues. He has not been listening to the inside.

If he had listened to the inside, here's another version of the conversation. When his son told him that he didn't like school anymore, suppose his dad had replied, "I've noticed that you're having difficulty with school. If you want to tell me about it, I'll try to understand." Then his son says, "I don't know, dad. You'd probably think it was stupid, but I don't like school. It's totally impractical. I'm not getting a thing out of it." Dad answers, "In other words, you don't think school is doing you much good." Son: "That's right. And more than that, I'm beginning to think I'm a failure. I took this reading test, and they told me that I'm reading on a fourth-grade level. Fourth grade! I'm a junior in high school. I'm afraid I'm going to flunk. I might as well quit, but I don't really want to quit. What do you think I should do, dad?"

The dad's hearing has improved because instead of rushing in and giving his son a lecture as soon as he heard that he didn't like school anymore and wanted to quit, he tried to understand what was going on in his son's life. This opened a new opportunity for the son and his dad to talk together about some possible solutions to the problem.

Jesus knew that when your hearing is from the inside out, then remarkable things begin to happen to you and to those you have listened to with empathy. The first thing that happens is

this: the more deeply you understand other people, the more you begin to appreciate them. To touch the soul of another human being is to walk on holy ground.

In her book Letters to a Young Therapist, Mary Pipher, a therapist who has listened to people's difficulties for years, has this to say about the importance of her profession and about the importance of listening from the inside: "We therapists are small potatoes, but we are connected to an ancient and beautiful idea. Since time began, humans have needed shamans and tribal healers. We have implored each other for help exorcising our demons. Since the beginning, we have asked the same questions — Am I safe? Am I important? Am I forgiven? Am I loved?" A little later, she adds, "I have discovered that being a therapist is less about making a living and more about living my life. Simply put, it's a way of paying attention, which is the purest form of love .... When you open yourself to the pain of the world, you become the medicine that heals the world."

Another thing that happens when you listen to others from the inside is that you are more able to hear God in your life. Listening to people from the inside is good practice for listening to God. This kind of listening takes time and patience. People do not always reveal themselves to you on your schedule and timetable. You have to learn not to be pushy. The same is true in your listening to God.

In the first healing story from today's scripture reading, there is this persistent mother who has an ill daughter. She won't give up, even though she was considered someone not worthy by those around Jesus. This is more than a healing story. It's also a parable. It tells you that the love of God in Jesus can save you from anything that possesses you. God's love, God's grace is not exclusive. God includes people you want to keep out.

In the second healing story of Jesus healing the man who was deaf and because of that also had a speech impediment, you learn that you might also need to be healed of other kinds of deafness. Because of your own self-righteousness, you might not be hearing what other people are saying and what God is saying through them.

The woman with the daughter who was ill and the man who was deaf were both considered by the society around them as outsiders and not worthy of God's love. Jesus included both of them in his love, and he includes you and me. He wants you and me to love others as he loves us. Amen.