

“The Gift or the Giver?”

I want you to notice a few things in our gospel reading for today:

“ They brought to Jesus a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; & begged him to lay his hand on him.

He took him aside in private, away from the crowd,

and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.

Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”

And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one...

“...He took him aside in private....he sighed....Jesus ordered them to tell no one....”

Hold on to those 3 things – isolation, sighing, and silence – and we’ll come back to them later.

But first I have a question for you.

Have you ever known someone who was a user, a manipulator, a con artist —

someone who flatters you, tells you how much they care, how special you are,

and so you go out of your way to help them and support them and meet their every need,

but then when you ask them for something they are all of the sudden unreachable, unavailable, too busy to help?

And after that pattern repeats often enough, you eventually come to understand

that it’s all an act, that they really don’t care about you but only about what they can get out of you.

They are more interested in the gift than the giver.

It seems that was the case with Jesus – people kept coming to him

to hear a great speech, to get healed, to witness some miracle, and he would do all he could for them,

but most of the time they weren’t really interested in him or in taking his message seriously.

There were all the times when he was tired after a long day and ended the healing sessions and went to leave,

but the crowds followed him and wouldn’t allow him a moment of peace or time to rest and recover.

There were the times he healed people and they didn’t even say thanks –

like the 10 lepers, only 1 of whom returned to express gratitude.

There were the times after he fed the multitudes when he expressed his cynicism,

saying that people only cared that he had provided food for their bellies,

not understanding that he was the Bread of Life who could meet their deepest need on a permanent basis.

There was the time when he talked with the woman at the well

and told her that he had so much more to give her than physical water.

He was the Living Water who could quench her spiritual thirst every day for the rest of her life.

Healings and miracles weren’t the point, Jesus kept trying to explain.

They were simply signs that pointed

to something much greater, much more amazing, much more life-changing and fulfilling.

So it is no wonder that Jesus kept trying to play down the healings and the wonders and the miracles.

He didn’t mind helping people, but those things were not the point.

And yet those were the things people kept focusing on.

Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber captured the sentiment well in “King Herod’s Song” from “Jesus Christ Superstar”:

“Jesus, I am overjoyed to meet you face-to-face.

You’ve been getting quite a name all around the place....

Prove to me that you’re divine: change my water into wine....

Prove to me that you’re no fool: walk across my swimming pool...

Feed my household with this bread; You can do it on your head!”

The healings and miracles, while they brought in the crowds,

often turned out to be more of a distraction from Jesus’s larger mission than they were a sign of it.

And so it is no wonder that sometimes Jesus wanted to do the healing in private,

that sometimes he sighed even in the middle of a healing,

and that sometimes he asked people to keep news of the healing quiet.

I've shared with you before that there was a time after I was in the hospital last fall when I had a day when I was doubting God's love, doubting God's promises, doubting that I had heard God correctly. And a friend insisted I had. But through my tears I cried, "Well then, I need a sign! I need a miracle!" And my friend replied, "If you need a sign, if you need a miracle, God will give it to you". And not 10 minutes later I had a message from a man I didn't even know who said God had told him to give me over a thousand dollars so I could buy air cleaners for the church! That's the most amazing miracle I've ever experienced. And it's not the only one. I keep a journal of signs and wonders and every time I read through it, it just blows my mind. But my friend gave me some important advice. "Don't focus too much on the miracles, because what's far more important than the miracles is the one who performs the miracles." In other words, "Don't focus on the gift, but on the Giver".

It's the same message we hear in our psalms today. In Psalm 16, the Psalmist writes, *"I have no good apart from you.... those who choose another god multiply their sorrows."* [Ps 15.2b, 4a] In other words if we focus on the gift, we've made that gift our god. And the Psalmist goes on to say that while God's right hand holds pleasures, i.e., gifts, it is the Giver, God's presence, God's own self, that provides fullness of joy. [Ps 16.11b]

And in Psalm 73, while the Psalmist promises to *"tell of all ... [God's] deeds"* [Ps 73.28c], i.e., God's gifts, it is clear that the writer's focus is on the Giver: *"Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you".* [Ps 73.25]

So often we hear in scripture that we should give praise and thanks to God. Praise and thanks. And while we may think those are synonyms they actually have two different connotations. We give thanks for what God does; we give praise for who God is.

God has performed so many miracles in my life that I can hardly believe it, and I am so grateful because knowing what God HAS done in the past helps me to hold on in faith to what God has promised he WILL do in the future. But even if God doesn't do what I'm trusting him to do, I understand now that the gifts are not the most important thing. The most important thing is the Giver, God, and whether I end up with the gifts or not, I will still trust him.

On Thursday evening I listened to an online concert presented by Thrivent with Christian Songwriter and Singer, Lauren Daigle. And one of her songs, "Trust in You", expressed this exact same truth: *"... When you don't move the mountains I'm needing you to move, When you don't part the waters I wish I could walk through, When you don't give the answers as I cry out to you, I will trust, I will trust, I will trust in you."*

The truth is: God delights in answering your prayers, in sending you signs and wonders, and in demonstrating how much he loves you by performing miracles in your life. And God desires your thanks for the gifts he's given – what he has done and is doing and will do in your life. But most of all, God desires what we who have been created in God's image desire – to be loved simply for who we are.

This week may each and every one of remember to give thanks for the gifts but even more important to give praise for the Giver. To that Giving God be all honor and praise and glory now and forever. **Amen and Amen**