

James 2: 1-17
Mark 7:24-37
Proper 14 Year B

“I Am Blind, Too.”
The Rev. Julia A. Fritts Sept. 5, 2009

In the Name of the One Holy and Living God.+ Amen.

Our scripture speaks to us today about faith, and about works. James writes to his fellow Followers of The Way about the need for balance between faith, and works of faith. What good is it, he writes, if a brother or sister is hungry or cold and we say *“Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,”* without offering anything else to help them? *“...Faith by itself, he says, “if it has no works, is dead.”*

On the other hand, for followers of Christ, offering works without faith is not enough either. Our charge as Christians is to offer real help in Jesus’ name, in a way that points to him, in the hope that those who do not know him will be drawn closer to him. Not only works; not only faith. A good mix of both.

Our Gospel text focuses on two healing miracles, both works of faith. The woman, bowing at Jesus’ feet, is desperate for her daughter’s healing. She has complete faith in the healing power of Jesus as a man of God. And she is made so strong and so bold by her desperation on her daughter’s behalf that she challenges Jesus, she reminds Jesus, of the all-encompassing love of God: she understands that, even though she knew she was considered by his culture to be worth less than a dog, being a Syrophenician Gentile and a woman at that, she knew that even she and her little girl had a place at God’s table. *“Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,”* she said, and Jesus does a beautiful thing: he changes his mind. He is struck by her faith, and her capacity to hope for a sign of God’s sure love for her, even in the midst of a mother’s worst nightmare. She had the faith and the heart and the tenacity to seek out, and to find, God’s blessing.

From this healing miracle, Jesus moves on towards the city of the Decapolis, where a man is brought to Jesus by his friends. This man is deaf, and nearly mute. We don’t know if this deaf man has witnessed Jesus’ healing power; we don’t know what his faith was. We know that his friends had faith in Jesus – they begged him to lay his hand on him. And so Jesus, in his earthy way, *“put his fingers in his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue,”* asked God for opening, and immediately the man was healed! Another miracle, which required both faith and works; another example of looking for God’s blessing.

Sometimes we have to really *look* for God’s blessings. Sometimes we feel worth less than the dogs underneath God’s table. But each one of us is beloved of God, and is given the capacity to sense God’s presence and care for us – with ears, or eyes, or hearts - if we’ll only listen or look. How many of us have all five of our senses intact, and yet forget half the time to really engage them? We hear of Jesus healing the blind, and the deaf, and we think of them as being very different from us - forgetting that half the time we allow the world to distract and consume us to the point that we are blind, and deaf, too.

Many of you know that I moved last month, and am blessed to be living in a little home again after four years of temporary apartment life. And so I’ve been unpacking things which were boxed away these years – and I came across a favorite book from my daughter’s childhood – Carl Sandburg’s *“Rootabaga Stories,”* which I’ve been reading

again. In this beautiful book, there's a story about a character named "the Potato-Faced Blind Man." The potato-faced blind man is a wise old fellow who sits on the steps of the Post Office everyday, playing his accordion for the passersby. He so wished he could see like other people could, but made the best of it, taking in all the beauty around him in the sounds he heard. He took great delight in birdsong and conversation, all the sounds in the air, and in music. One day, he tied a sign onto his sleeve, which read, "I am blind, too." And that day a young boy asked him, "why does your sign say "I am blind TOO?" The potato-faced blind man replied, "Oh, I am sorry to explain to you why this is so. You see, so many of the people who pass by here going in and coming out, they have eyes – but they see so little. They look where they are going, and they get where they wish to get, but they forget to see all around them. They are my blind brothers. It is for them that I have the sign that reads, "I am blind, too."¹

The Syrophenician Gentile woman, and the deaf man and his friends, and even the potato-faced blind man, were able to find signs of God's blessing. I think that the signs of God's sure presence and love for us are all around us, if we have the faith and the tenacity and the will to find them. Those of us who have ears to hear, and eyes to see, and hearts to intuit can look and listen and discern more intently for God's hand at work in our lives, for God's faith in us. We as people of faith can practice this art of being "awake to God," and be more useful to those who may have lost sight of any sense of Holy Presence in their lives. We can practice what St. Francis of Assisi taught: he said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." It is a powerful help for a doubting person to see someone living a life of faith, doing powerful work in the name of God's love. It opens up what was closed to the possibility of faith, to the radical possibility that God is real, and really loves them too. It is some of the most powerful work we can do, this living and working a life of faith.

One early morning last week in my new home, I was sitting outside, drinking my coffee and waking up to a new day. Even only half-awake, I was already totally focused on the concerns ahead for that day, when the scent of grass and trees reminded me to look around, to stop worrying, to take in the soft air, the breeze in the leaves, the birdsong. I looked all around, at the sky, and the clouds, and as I kept looking I realized that there, right overhead of me, in the middle of a beautiful blue-sky day, was a little piece of a rainbow! One short but complete chunk of rainbow, right overtop of me, and I would have completely missed it if I hadn't really looked. It made me wonder what other signs of God's presence and beauty do I miss just for not looking; how blind and deaf am I half the time?

My prayer for us as we begin to say farewell to summer is that we practice really taking in the beauty of God's creation, and let that practice inform all of our senses to discern the power of God's handiwork in our lives. This is the heart of a faithful life, and the foundation of all good works.
Amen.

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Stamford, CT. Sept. 5, 2009

¹ Carl Sandburg, *Rootabaga Stories*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, NY 1922, pp 34-39.