

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 5, 2021

Happy Labor Day weekend! As a reminder, Labor Day is an annual celebration of the social and economic achievements of American workers. The holiday is rooted in the late nineteenth century when labor activists pushed for a federal holiday to recognize the many contributions workers have made to America's strength, prosperity, and well-being. Let us take the time today to remember and pray for all who labor for the greater good – perhaps especially in the last couple of years.

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be God's kingdom, now and forever. Amen.

Let's pray this together:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

Let us now pray together the collect of the day.

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

First Lesson
Isaiah 35:4-7a

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,

with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'

Then 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.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

The Response

Psalm 146

Lauda, anima mea

1 Hallelujah!

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

2 Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth,
for there is no help in them.

3 When they breathe their last, they return to earth,
and in that day their thoughts perish.

4 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help!
whose hope is in the Lord their God;

5 Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them;
who keeps his promise for ever;

6 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed,
and food to those who hunger.

7 The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind;
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

8 The Lord loves the righteous;
the Lord cares for the stranger;
he sustains the orphan and widow,
but frustrates the way of the wicked.

9 The Lord shall reign for ever,
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.
Hallelujah!

The Epistle

James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not

they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.[For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.]

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

The Gospel

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to Matthew.
Glory to you Lord Christ.

Mark 7:24-37

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they 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; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

A Reflection

May the words written and the prayer of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

I am often interested to read over sermons I have written in the past – just to see how things have shifted and what grabbed my attention in the past as opposed to now. The last time I wrote on this Gospel, I was quite taken with the sequence around “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” A statement that sounds perhaps argumentative, perhaps a bit aggressive, and Jesus responds by offering “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” In response to this perhaps argumentative statement, Jesus responds as though it were a statement of faith. So perhaps when we talk back to the Spirit, it can still be done from a place of faith. But that is not the passage that spoke to me this time.

For today, I was struck by the passage about the healing of the deaf man. You read “They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they 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.” A miracle, but we have come to almost expect that from Jesus, haven’t we? But what is the message of the teaching to consider in this miracle?

I believe that can be found in the simple two words “Be opened.” The deaf man also had an impediment in his speech, which would also make it difficult, at best, to get by in the world. By the action of opening his ears the man could then speak plainly.

Consider it for a moment. By improving his ability to hear, he “spoke plainly.” Perhaps if we can listen well, we can also then speak more clearly. It is, unfortunately, a common thing that happens – we don’t listen, while the other person is speaking, we are considering our response. We don’t hear, we are planning our next statement. I have mentioned before how often at the shelter I end up just listening, and that is fine with me. It’s hard to describe what it does if you listen to someone who does not feel they are heard very often.

“Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” What else in your life needs to be opened? If we open our eyes, we can better see God’s presence in the world. With our eyes open, we can also better see the places where we can help, or perhaps where God can be taken. If we open our hearts something similar happens. We can take in more, we can feel a little more. Where are you stuck? What is blocked and interfering with your movement in the world?

In the Psalm today, we read “The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down.” Prison bars can be opened so all can be free, eyes of the blind can be opened, and we can be lifted up, opened from our burdens.

In Isaiah, we are offered “Then 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. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.”

The presence of the Spirit opens things and does not restrict them. Finding joy in openness is part of who we are as Christians. So, like the “lame shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”

Let’s pray this week that we can have our blocked places opened and tended to.

Amen.

Let us now confess our sins against God and our neighbor. Praying together:

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Let us now pray as our Lord Jesus Christ taught us. Pray this as you will, out loud or to yourself – just know that God hears you.

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.*

We will continue with the prayer of Spiritual Communion. This prayer was written by St. Alphonsus de Liguori. This prayer is now often used when the church is in a place of fasting from Communion, and I have heard this used in many of the online services being offered.

Jesus, I believe that you are truly present in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. I love you above all things, and long for you in my soul. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. As though you have already come, I embrace you and unite myself entirely to you; never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.

Take some time this week to pay in gratitude for the gifts in your life. Perhaps open yourself from the far that seems so prevalent these days.

A little homework assignment for this week. I'd like everyone to give some thought to the Trinity church and where it is going. What would you like the church to become in the next few years? How are you willing to commit yourself to that becoming? If you have some thoughts to share, please feel free to send them to me at the address below. I'd really like to hear back from you on these questions!

Hoping to see you again soon.

Yours in Christ,
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