

Glen Ridge Congregational Church,  
September 6, 2009, Proper 18, Pentecost 14  
Mark 7:24-37; Isaiah 35:4-7a  
Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I guess it's official – summer is just about over regardless of what the calendar says. Labor Day is tomorrow – some schools are already open – ours next week. Marty's back working on the Sunday School preparations, confirmation class letters have gone out, Tom is working on musical selections for the choirs, both adults and children. Nancy Bigelow has been organizing SCEEP materials, Betsie has emailed the church council for their regular meeting dates so we can get the calendar up to speed. And we're getting regular calls inquiring about the fall rummage sale. There's lots of activity around the high school already – I've seen runners out on our streets getting back into shape, Band Camp has been in session, teachers are back in their classrooms getting ready for a new year – and there's a bite in the air – these beautiful days are a welcome relief from the heat and humidity of early August.

With the opening of school starts all the associated activities too – sports practices and games, homework, music and dance classes – lots of choices for our children and families. And of course, adults will find their calendars filling up too after a summer off from their commitments – ministries are meeting here again – just look at the difference in our church calendar! Maybe we're already starting to think there's too much to do in too short a time.

Some families also find that just coming here to worship on a Sunday morning can be a scheduling nightmare too – more and more people work on Sunday mornings outside the home, there are sports programs on Sundays – if anyone is out working during the week there's laundry to do, shopping to be done, cleaning the house. And how often do I hear people say, “But that's the only morning of the week that I can sleep in!”

At least one of these statements has to sound familiar to everyone here. And you know, if we're not careful, attending worship can become just one more appointment on our calendar.

We are constantly being asked to commit ourselves – to something. Our children need to develop the discipline that can come through sports – we are asked to commit the time and effort and resources to see that it happens. We are reminded that for our town, our school system, countless other civic organizations, to function smoothly they all need their members to be actively involved. And we hear the same words here too – this church needs each and every one of us to share our time, talent, and treasure to continue our ministry. All of these are important and worthwhile functions – it is the world we live in, but it doesn't take long to soon wonder where our loyalties are, and how thin can we spread ourselves? We get tired, don't we. We get overwhelmed.

I wonder, does it bother us, maybe even frighten us, that we sometimes don't seem to have enough time or energy to spend an hour on Sundays with God and God's family gathered as church? Does it bother us that the most conversation we may have on any given day with our children is in the car as we taxi them around? Does it bother us

that we seem to become slaves to our calendars, moving too quickly to the next thing, to appreciate and savor what it is we have scheduled? Does it bother us, even a little, that we approach this time of year with a little dread, wishing for the slower pace of summer instead of looking ahead with excitement, looking at the challenges and joys of a new start? Are we feeling not really ready to take on the pace of the fall and the rest of the school year that's ahead of us? I've heard that from too many people this week and it's a real concern.

Isaiah in today's lesson tells those who are of a fearful heart, be strong! Do not fear. What do you think frightened those people? Isaiah describes them as people not unlike us – who have given their loyalty to the pursuit of self or of the world, rather than trusting in a relationship with God.

How often do we tell ourselves that we are doing all these things for our children, for better health, for the betterment of our town? Isn't that what we should be doing? What we're supposed to be doing? But still, isn't there the fear that we might be missing out on something, our heart is not full, and we wonder what it might be? I've talked about the hole in the soul we all have at one time or another – what will fill it?

Maybe we've become a little deaf, a little blind, to where all these things should be pointing us.

It's not realistic to drop all these commitments, is it – life is indeed complex today. Families have so many more choices than my family did years ago. I wonder if maybe we have too many choices to make – and we do choose to fill our calendars – maybe too full. But all of us here today have made another choice too and that's good news: to set aside this time to come before God, to introduce our children to the Story, to gather in worship as part of the Body of Christ. Our community is enriched by our, by your presence here – we are incomplete without you. But. We're still overbooked. We're tired. We're looking for something more, aren't we.

Let's think for a minute about the pace of our lives. Are we so busy that we don't take the time to savor the moment? Are we too busy looking ahead to the next thing to cross off our list? Have we become a little self absorbed on this marathon of life? Do we take the time to stop and hear another person tell of their pain, their worry, their fears, and respond even without words? Has our busyness made us deaf to the needs of others and to our own needs? How is our relationship with our spouse, our children, our friends, with God? How much time do we spend with each of these on the average each day?

We're not the only ones who are busy – take a look at the gospel lesson for this morning – Jesus is busy too – healing, teaching, preaching – but one of the things we might notice about him is that he knows when to take a break – he knows when he has to get away and recharge, reconnect with his center – his relationship with God. But even in the midst of his busyness, he teaches us how to relate to each other. Let's experience what that might feel like.

Today for a few moments, let's enter into this story and allow ourselves to be the deaf person presented to Jesus in the gospel lesson. Imagine, being brought to Jesus, not being able to hear the voices of others, led to him by your friends, being surrounded by the faces of strangers, you're vulnerable to the whispers and prejudices of the world. Let's imagine ourselves standing before Jesus.

When your friends bring us to him, He doesn't do anything in the midst of the crowd. No, regardless of how busy he might be, this moment will be with you and you alone. For that moment, you are the only person in the crowd to him.

Haven't you met people like that? When you're in their presence, there's nobody else in the world – at least it feels like that. You have full attention, full presence – it's a breathtaking experience, isn't it.

So you're standing there before Jesus – feel his gaze deep into your eyes – touching it seems your innermost being, your very soul. He's not afraid to come close and touch you – even putting his fingers in your ears and upon your tongue. You watch him as his own lips form words, spoken toward the heavens, and suddenly you can hear him – and you can speak to him as you've never spoken before.

That moment will come for each one of us. We will be invited to communion today, to be presented before God. Jesus will come to us and we are asked not to be afraid. Jesus will present himself to us in bread and cup and ask that we receive him into our life. In his gift of himself, we will be offered new life, the opportunity to hear his words, to feel his presence, to feel his love, to speak his promise for ourselves.

What does all this mean? Will your life, my life, be changed because of today? Because you allowed yourself to be presented in all your weakness before God – and Jesus took you aside and touched you with his life and love? It's possible!

What did it mean for the deaf man from today's gospel reading? It did change his life – he couldn't keep from telling what had happened. All that had blocked him from hearing and speaking was gone! The way was made clear for him.

Will it be that way for us today? Will we go forth from this place proclaiming what God has done for us through Jesus Christ? Hidden in this passage is a profound statement about evangelism – will we be like those friends who brought this man to Jesus? Are we evangelists as they are, bringing our friends to experience the healing we've felt? Will we shout for all the world how Jesus has given his life so that we might be able to hear, to speak, to live new lives with him? Will we live as Jesus has taught us? As Jesus has modeled for us? Will our very actions, even without words, tell of God's wondrous works in and through us?

You can believe this: the person who knows what it is to stand before God and not be afraid will have ears to hear the voice of God in the world. The person who has known God coming into his or her life will have their ears opened to hear God's voice in the people who can't speak for themselves. The person who has known God coming into his or her life will become present to others – friends, families, co-workers, strangers – even as Jesus is present was present for that deaf man and for each of us today. He comes to us, and we must go into the world. We will find the words to tell of his promises, to show his love, to offer his hope. We will touch others as we have been touched.

Today Jesus invites you to come forward to be touched by him, to be given new life through him. If you accept his invitation, though, you will also be accepting responsibility. Proclaim the good news of Christ by what you do and by what you say. Do not be deaf to the cries of the world searching for life. Do not be deaf to your neighbor in need, to the loneliness, the pain, the fear, that cries out to be healed. Do not be silent about the Christ who brings wholeness and life to answer those cries. Become a sacrament – allowing God to use you as an instrument for bring God's grace into the

world. Know that in Christ you receive not only life, but also new ears to hear, a new tongue to speak the good news.

Go into the world of your children, of your work, of your neighborhoods, of your town. Know that the schedules you keep are not weights but rather openings to share the new life you have found in Christ this morning and every week here. Know that God is with you. Have no fear. Come to the table and be strengthened. Be nurtured. Receive the gift of life. And then share it with all you meet. Amen.

Let us pray in the words of Mother Teresa:

Here I am, Lord, body, heart, and soul. Grant that with your love I may be big enough to reach the world, and small enough to be at one with you.

Lord, open our eyes that we may see you in our brothers and sisters.

Lord, open our ears that we may hear the cries of the hungry, the cold, the frightened, the oppressed.

Lord, open our hearts, that we may love each another as you love us.

Renew in us your spirit.

Lord, free us, and make us one. Amen.