

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 6, 2015, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 7:31-37

"God's 'Secret' Plan for the Whole World"

Have you ever tried to keep a secret? By the looks on your faces come of you might be sitting on one now! I mean REALLY keep a secret, until you feel it is time to tell everyone? The juicier the secret – the more people want to spill the beans. It's your news but it would seem that others want to tell it. For example – Marilyn and I had to keep the secret that Theresa is expecting our second grandchild. We could not tell anyone until they made the announcement first. Boy was that ever tough. We like to share everything with y'all but we couldn't. So many times we wanted to tell someone – and it almost popped out of our mouths – but we did good in keeping it quiet until Theresa and Andrew announced it themselves – and they gave us the go ahead.

In today's Holy Gospel – Jesus heals a man and then asks everyone there to keep it a secret – BUT they can't and they don't. Is it ironic that Jesus heals a man who cannot hear or speak – and the people who witness it cannot help but blab it all over the place, in spite of Jesus asking them otherwise? Secrets and speech, secrets and speech; that's what the story is all about! The secret was not that Jesus made the man speak, and them to hear – no, the secret was that Jesus was ministering to Gentiles – and there were those in power of the Temple who would make a huge case out of this, and declare this to be improper and because of that they would call Jesus unclean! Jesus was sent by God, the Father for the WHOLE WORLD – but it was not time for this to become news. For centuries God had been speaking through His prophets to declare that this was going to happen, but it would not be until the Jewish people rejected Jesus as the Messiah that the mantle would be passed to the Gentiles – who would then receive the Commission to persist in sharing the Gospel. The proof is what the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 1:16 *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."*

What took place that day in the area called the Decapolis showed Jesus purposely stepping into the world of the non-Jew and then He took this Gentile man *"away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue." "He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!")." "At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly."* (Mark 7:33-35) This is the supernatural fulfillment of the words from Isaiah 35:5-6 which was our Old Testament reading and which say *"Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy."* This was a prophecy of the renewal of Israel after experiencing the long, sad years of exile. God's people would be rescued from pagan oppression, and all of creation itself would celebrate. Healings then, and healings now - always was and is, and even more so with the miracles of Jesus', are a sign of God's love breaking in to the painful and death-laden world that we live in. It was and is a pointer to the great healing that will happen when the "secret" is finally out, when Jesus is **finally revealed** as Messiah to the whole world. When He comes again everyone will recognize Him, and praise Him as the anointed One of God. I find it very

interesting that this account from the Gospel of Mark takes place on what is considered the Gentile side or eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. There were ten Gentile cities which the Gospel calls the Decapolis and the cities were Damascus, Philadelphia, Raphana, Scythopolis, Gadara, Hippos, Dion, Pella, Gerasa, and Canatha. With the exception of Scythopolis which is really Beth-Shean, (Beth-Shean is the city, the Tel where Saul was killed) all these cities are east of the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee. Those are the 10 Pagan cities.

Let me paint you a picture about the importance of the Galilee being a gateway to the Gentiles. The Galilee region lies in the extreme northern part of Israel and at its heart is the Sea of Galilee. This freshwater lake is fed by the Jordan River, bringing it water from the melting mountain snow peaks. The drinking water for ALL of Israel, even today, comes from the Sea of Galilee. Isaiah in 9:1 referred to this region as the Galilee of the Gentiles because much of the trade from the east to the west came through this area. Its location was prime because of the cross roads called the “via maris” or the “way to the sea” that connected the east with the ten cities, the Decapolis that I spoke of, and then through Capernaum and on to the Mediterranean. Remnants of this are visible even today.

I want to suggest this to you: Just think of the things that Jesus did in this Gateway to the Gentiles:

- it was here that He preached the Sermon on the Mount,
- it was here that He fed the 5,000 men and their families,
- it was here that Peter professed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God,
- it was here that Jesus performed so many of His miracles, including the woman with the bleeding issue – who just wanted to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment,
- it was on a mountain in the Galilee region that the risen Jesus gave His disciples the Great Commission, from Matthew chapter 28, – to bring the Gospel to the whole world – telling the world filled with Jews and Gentiles about Him.
- Jesus’ ministry in the Galilee fulfilled what God had predicted through His Prophet Isaiah, seven hundred years earlier. In Isaiah 9:1-2 God said a “great light” would shine in the Galilee after the arrival of the Messiah, and He predicted in Isaiah 49:6 *"I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."* God fulfilled these promises *"that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles."* (Acts 26:23) Plus it is the fulfillment of the words of Simeon, the elderly man who spoke from the Temple Courts when he met the 8 day old baby, who was about to be officially named Jesus, upon His circumcision: *"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."* (Luke 2:29-32) If you ever do Morning Prayer – you see the Song of Simeon.

I would like you to turn with me in your Pew Bibles to a very important passage – spoken by Peter, as recorded in Act 10. Let’s turn to page 1709 to verse 36. *"You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all." "You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached--" "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with Him." ""We are witnesses of everything He did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed Him by hanging Him on a cross," "but God raised Him from the dead on the third day and caused Him to be seen." "He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen--by us who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead." "He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead." "All the prophets testify about Him that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name."" "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message." "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." (Acts 10:36-46)*

Let’s look at another proof that God’s plan of salvation was for the whole world. Let’s turn to page 1687 of our Pew Bibles – to John chapter 21. Let me just say, having been to Israel twice – and gone to these places, especially here where John 21, the Bible, the Gospels spring to life. You dream dreams, even daydream of these places where it happened. Begin with verse 4: *"Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus." "He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered." "He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish."* That may seem like a short little miracle – but there is so much more behind it. The disciples were doing what the fishermen of the Galilee normally did – they fished at night, using a light to attract the fish, but they came up empty. Remember I spoke earlier about the Gentile side of the lake? That is where the Decapolis is, on the eastern shore. Here is where that becomes important. It was tradition for the fishermen to point their boat north as they began to fish, and would throw their nets over the LEFT hand side of the boat – toward the Jewish or Hebrew side of the lake. Jesus told them to try something VERY different, and that was to go back out (it was morning) and throw their net over the RIGHT side of the boat – the Gentile side of the lake. What happened? *"They were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish."* Jesus was now telling the “fishers of men” who followed Him for 3 years to expand the scope of their ministry to include Gentiles too! Thank God they listened, or we would not be here today – would we? God loves the WORLD – and that includes everyone – and so the Gospel needs to be shared with everyone! One of my very favorite verses of the Bible comes from the first chapter of the Book of Acts, verse 8. Jesus is just about to ascend to the Father and He instructs the disciples that they are to His witnesses – *“in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth!”* You know where Douglas is? It is at the ends of the earth! That includes Waycross, Cordele, Pearson, and yes, even Valdosta. Even Jacksonville – everywhere – everywhere needs

to be included. The other day our doorbell rang – I was not home so Marilyn answered. There were two nicely dressed young men from the church of Jesus Christ and latter day saints = Mormons. They picked the wrong doorbell to ring. She told them to go away. She was very nice to them, and was preaching the truth to them and they left. She did tell them the truth, which is what we are all called to do. The invitation is NOT exclusive! It is up to the hearer to accept Jesus or not. Gentile believers are “grafted in” to the family of Abraham, and so adopted heirs of the Kingdom of God. Romans 11:17 says that we are “grafted in.”

Since Jesus’ Words are no longer a secret – then we as members of His family are called, commissioned and charged with the job of sharing the “Good News” of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Here is a free little Greek lesson – the word “εὐαγγέλιον” “you-ah-gelyon” means Gospel or good news. Everywhere in the New Testament, written in the original Greek, that the word εὐαγγέλιον shows up it is talking about the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus and that is what we are called to share.

- If Jesus Christ is the Son of God – isn’t that good news?
- If Jesus Christ rose from the dead – isn’t that good news?
- If Jesus Christ went to the cross with your name and my name on His mind – isn’t that good news?
- Because of that we have the certainty – the assurance that when He comes again – we are going to be a part of the party – we are going to celebrate and sing His glory for eternity! Isn’t that good news?

Remember the words that I read earlier from Romans 1:16 *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."* Every day we should be looking for opportunities to share what Jesus has done for you – and let them experience His love first hand. Let’s get the Word out!