

Last Sunday we considered the truth that God is always working towards the good of His people, and that this truth cannot be judged by what is seen by our fleshly eyes. Who is it that goes home justified? Is it the pious Pharisee, who diligently studies the Law, who gives generously of all he has, who fasts twice a week, who lives no life of gross, open sin? No. It is the tax collector. A man with a reprehensible job, one who has worked for the occupation, has been known for fleecing his countrymen for his own gain. The outward appearance means nothing. It is not even his humble hiding in the shadows or the outward ceremony of striking his breast, but the hidden prayer of his heart, the sigh of contrition and repentance and his trust the total confidence in God's mercy.

And so also we were warned against judging God's workings in the broader experience of life. Do not measure God's favor by how smooth and prosperous your life is. Job was always the beloved child of God, indeed, it is God's delight in Job that prompts Satan's desire to attack him, and that drives God to permit it, to show that truth. In our hymn of the month for September we sing this truth again and again, six times: what God ordains is always good. We can sing that, can stake all our understanding on that assertion, because, as we heard last Sunday, the defining reality, the lens through which we are to understand everything is the cross.

What we see in today's Gospel is a further demonstration of this truth. This is done in two ways. First in the particular crosses that are given us to bear, we can speak plainly concerning the pain and sorrow. We can call a thing what it is, and not have to tiptoe, talk around, try to deny, or caveat ourselves to death. Second, we see how God works through all things, especially the cross, to give gracious relief.

So today we hear of a deaf mute. Already here, God's Word stands in contrast to the world. The encouraged convention in speaking today is to underscore the humanity of every person. We aren't supposed to say "a deaf and mute man." Past ages and older translations were even harsher. They rendered it as "deaf and dumb." But since "dumb" is now used as an insult, and not being able to speak doesn't mean you're not smart, we don't use that word that way. So we are supposed to say, a person who is deaf and cannot speak. Or a person who is unable to walk, a person with this disability or handicap. I'm not even sure those words are acceptable today, I wouldn't be surprised if they aren't.

To an extent, this awareness of how we speak is fine. We don't need to get too worked up about it. There are points in history where those with hindered abilities were seen as less-than-human and disposable, and horrific things were done to them. That still happens today, where the wonders of medical technology can reveal an issue in development, or a handicap, and many a mother are encouraged to end that life because it will be too hard, too inconvenient. So much for emphasizing the personhood. The point is realize what Scripture teaches us in the blunt way it speaks of those seeking Jesus' help. It is patently obvious there is a problem, that the things of a person's body or mind are not as they ought to be. We ought never think, whether it's someone who is deaf, or mute, or paralyzed, or some other issue of body or mind, or life, that everyone is perfectly fine just the way they are.

Be able and willing, from God's Word to identify the problem, to speak of it plainly. That this person's body is not as it was intended by God to be from creation. That your relative, your friend's life is not in line with God's will for His creation. That the way your life is going leaves much to be desired, that you are not satisfied, life has not panned out as you once hoped. That you are sad, hurt, fearful, or sick. Call a

thing what it is. The man is deaf and mute, and that is not good, it is a sign of the corruption of sin that will always linger in this life, you will not, you cannot escape it.

Whatever it is, is different for everyone. As an aside, this ought move us to be a little more patient and forbearing with one another. You do not know what your fellow Christian is dealing with. It might seem they have it all together, life is going well. You do not know their hidden anguish of the mind, what they are dealing with at home, the chaos of their week. Do not be so quick to be critical. Perhaps that they were able to do anything, get anything done, is a sheer miracle. So perhaps it wasn't to your satisfaction, or the way you think it ought to have been done. Bear with one another in love.

What we are shown today is the particularity of every Christian's cross. We do not suffer generically, under some indistinguishable brokenness. The sorrows of life are not from blind chance or fate. They are custom and unique to us. Our Lord has not just broken people, or even just sinners, come to Him. We hear of the wide and varied conditions of life. Paralytics and demoniacs, deaf and blind, feverish and hemorrhaging, prideful and penitent, confused and wrong. Each one in that condition for a reason fit for them.

Here we butt up against a hard thing. We aren't given specific answers on this. Why this sickness for this person? Why this trouble at this time? The danger is to try to parcel that out into specifics. So in John chapter 9, when Jesus sees man blind from birth, **"His disciples asked Him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him'"** (2–3). The reason for the man's blindness, the reason for each and every cross you bear in this life, is planned out in God's hidden wisdom for what He is working out for us. And as Christians, we know, you can have absolute confidence that what God works out in this life, what He is after in everything you have and experience, is your eternal good.

And so what do the illnesses and oppression do in these people in the Gospels? Where do their friends and family take them? To Jesus. The cross you bear, recognize it, call it what it is, and then see the Father driving you to His Son through it.

And as you come before our Lord, know that He doesn't give broad, generic relief. He gives concrete, custom made relief for every cross. Notice how our Lord doesn't work His miracles the same way. Sometimes it's by a word, on a few occasions spoken from a distance. Still others, it's by a hidden use of His will to help and aid. Oftentimes it's by a simple touch, sometimes even just the hem of His garment. Sometimes He gives a touch paired with His word, and sometimes it's not just a touch on the arm or eyes, but a shoving of fingers into deaf ears, and grabbing a tongue. He knows every hurt and need. He sees every wound that pains and grieves. He works to bring relief to that.

He is always at work in our lives to bring us further in the faith, to realize and to know His love and care, and He does grant some relief. You are not sick forever and always, you get better. Rough days become light. Woe does give way to joy. The hows and whens are not revealed to us in Scripture, yet we can often look back in our lives, and see how God was at work for our good.

But there are two ways that you can know already, that God is at work for your good, that He is there with His consolation and promises, even as you are in the midst of sorrow and trial. One is the comfort given from God's Word in individual confession and absolution, or simply coming to your pastor and sharing

the difficulties of life. Part of that conversation, whether in the counsel after the confession of the sins that trouble you, or more general conversation, is the specific application of God's Word to you.

I've talked about it this way before, what if you could go to a doctor and get a custom-made prescription, not necessarily something that would instantly heal every malady, but would assuredly help? All you had to do would be to speak frankly about whatever health or mental issues you had? If we could have that, who here wouldn't hesitate to get that relief and help? That is what individual confession and absolution is. It is a custom made sermon, an application of God's Word, to you, in the face of your struggles and needs. Since it is God's Word, you have the absolute assurance that it will help. It may not take the cross away. It will lighten the burden. It will show you that God's grace for you in Christ Jesus is sufficient, it is enough, even if, as God deems, the thorn must stay in for a time.

Second, is to come to the Sacrament, not just out of habit, God forbid we ever do that, nor generically, as in, "Well, I'm a sinner and here I receive the forgiveness of sins. Well, I'm a bit sad or downcast from how life is, here is where Christ gives me His consolation." Those are perfectly godly sentiments and reasons to come to the Sacrament. But what I encourage all of you to do who commune today, is to come to the table with a specific, clear need in mind. That you come to receive Christ's body and blood with a specific sin that oppresses you in mind, or a particular need or sorrow, that you desire the Lord's help and relief for. And with that in mind, see the Sacrament given you today as your Lord's answer to that. Here is the specific heavenly prescription, the divine and heavenly remedy for it. Your Lord knows your needs, and here He well provides the answer.