

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
5 September 2021 (proper 23)
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

In the ancient world, most people would have assumed that the deaf man with a speech impediment we heard about just now suffered the way he did because of divine disfavour. But the crowd who was pressing in on Jesus—the crowd from which we're told he couldn't hide—had been listening to his teaching and perhaps had come to understand that such assumptions were wrong. And so they came with hope, trusting that Jesus could lift this pathetic, isolated man into God's healing presence and restore to him the fullness of his senses.

They were right, of course. Jesus didn't see a man who was a hopeless case, a man who had been condemned by God. Instead Jesus saw that this man's life had value. But only the love of God could release him, could free him, could open him up to the wonder of it. "Then looking up to heaven, [Jesus] sighed and said to him 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.'"

If ever there were a word for these times, surely this is it. The long, long months of lockdown have shown just how enervating being shut down can be. The trouble is, one can also get used to being shut down. It can become a way of life. Well, probably not the enforced lockdowns such as we've endured—the crowds milling around town this long weekend prove how desperate folks were to get out, to be opened.

No, the lockdowns I'm thinking about that can become a way of life are different. They're emotional and spiritual in nature and are imposed from within rather than from without. And they are by far more pernicious because they make us shrivel and atrophy to the point where we become afraid and ashamed to let people know the real us. They take over with such malignancy that we become reticent of letting ourselves be vulnerable—even though we *long* to be vulnerable. We long to be brave and trusting and loved and at peace, but we don't know how. And because we fear learning how we can trust and love and be at peace, we hide.

A way of hiding that's familiar to us is the drive to become the best, be it business leader, academic, doctor, actor—even priest. And let's face it: the admiration and affirmation of the world for competence—to say nothing of excellence—does feel good. But to get it often means that we must shut our true selves away and learn to live behind a facade. Woe betide public figures who are caught in act of being themselves.

And of course we can also now hide behind social media—Instagram and the like—where every plate of food is mouth-watering, every interior dazzling, every set of abdominals ripped, every child impossibly cute, every virtue signalled with exacting

correctness. It's all fake—and we all know it—and maybe that's what's so addictive about it. I think the reason social media has shut us down to the wondrous messiness of life is because it encourages us to ignore the closed doors behind which there are all sorts of skeletons: skeletons of shame, regret, and isolation. So when Jesus says, "Be opened," to the blind man, I think he's also saying it to all of us. That divine invitation—divine command—is the ultimate "Open sesame" spoken to closed and locked-down hearts shut off by the false gods of achievement and aspiration.

If I may be personal for a minute, I can tell you first-hand how living a shadowy ecclesiastical existence in which I was not fully, truly, open—out—took more of a toll on me than I want to admit. It was exhausting and diminishing to pretend that life could be compartmentalized, that whole parts of one's self could be closed off when required. Over the years I fell into a kind of spiritual Stockholm syndrome to the point where I became cynical and detached. After the defeat of the proposed change to the marriage canon at General Synod in 2019, I went for a drink with a friend. She was concerned about me, but I told her I was fine. After all *I* wasn't looking to the Church for affirmation. But I *wasn't* fine and I *was* looking for affirmation. And I was so afraid of being open that I closed myself off behind Decanal self-importance and innumerable affectations.

Yet Jesus says "Be opened," and he says it to you and to me and to the Church. Be opened to the possibilities that are there within us—there within life—waiting to be explored and embraced. Be opened to those who have the courage and vulnerability to be open to you, for only when we see one another's true humanity do we see Christ. We're not made for lockdown. We're made for community, and we find our meaning in community.

What's more, we're made to care for ourselves and for our neighbours by being open to the risk of seeing and being seen which is nothing more—nothing less—than the risk of love. In our gospel, Christ took the man away privately and healed him, and instructed him and his friends to say nothing. But he couldn't; he wouldn't. His life became an open book on which the life-changing power of God's love was written on every page.

As a dear friend always reminds me, there are only two responses: love and fear. Alas, fear is the ruling principle of life these days—fear of being laughed at, or losing an election, or growing old, or going broke, or dying from COVID-19—and the world has become a closed system of fear feeding on fear. But love is the key that opens the doors of all these fears—and how many more?—and allows us to walk through them. Love is what allows us to be healed of all the crippling shame we carry around and accept ourselves for who we are, to say nothing of affirming others for who they are. Love is what allows us—even in the midst of lockdown—to open ourselves to what really, *truly* matters. And it isn't power, prestige, or position.

Now for me to say that, to say that all we need to do is to allow ourselves to be opened to the life-changing love of God in Christ sounds facile, I grant you that. Like all of you,

I still fumble to find the key to the closed door of my life. But when I'm fumbling and frustrated and fearful I need to remember that love is the key. Love of self. Love of neighbour. Love of God—whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we could ask or imagine.