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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 18 (Pentecost 15), Series B
Saturday, September 8th, 2018
Sunday, September 9th, 2018

Sermon: “Be Opened!”¹

Text: Mark 7:31-37

Focus: Jesus opens our ears to hear his Word and frees our tongues to tell forth his praise.

Function: That they would gladly hear and learn God’s holy Word.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it” (SC, 3rd Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. “Be opened” (Mark 7:34, ESV).² That’s what Jesus says to the deaf and mute man in our Gospel lesson. “Be opened!” That’s also what Jesus says to us today, albeit for different reasons. This is really a wonderful Gospel lesson because it shows us two things: (1) the amazing, miraculous power of Jesus’ Word; and (2) Jesus’ great desire for each of us to hear and believe his holy Word.

Our story finds Jesus in the area of the Decapolis, a Gentile region southeast of the Sea of Galilee. This is *not* home turf (Jewish territory). Jesus is a stranger and a foreigner here, although his name is not unknown. In fact, quite the opposite. Wherever he goes, Jesus’ reputation as a miracle worker seems to precede him, and his entry into a city is sure to draw a crowd eager to be healed of their various diseases and demons.

So they bring to Jesus “a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment” (Mark 7:32). They want Jesus to lay hands on him in order to heal him according to his usual custom (1:31, 41; 5:23, 41; 8:25, etc.). But Jesus is not a one-size-fits-all kind of God. His compassionate care

¹ This is a reprise of a sermon originally preached on September 6th, 2015.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

is always focused and personal. Jesus doesn't only love the whole world. He also loves you and me—and this poor deaf and dumb man.

And so Jesus takes the man away from the crowd. He recognizes the isolation and confusion that so often attend the lives of the deaf. How do you negotiate life without one of your senses? How do you communicate with other people and engage in relationship? In the childhood game of Would You Rather, I remember once being asked, “Would you rather be blind or deaf?” Neither, thank you very much! Well, our poor friend had no choice in the matter. He couldn't hear and couldn't speak. Can you imagine such a life?! One of my pastor friends is married to a woman who is deaf from birth. From her, he has learned and observed a great deal about the “deaf community,” including the fact that many deaf people are so confused and embarrassed by their condition, that they often withdraw from society and prefer to be loners instead of navigating the difficulties of social interaction. In many ways, the deaf are often lonelier even than the blind.

Imagine trying to learn how to read the Scriptures or even pray without hearing other people do it first. They did not have sign language back then! Other than a few gestures and finger pointing, how could you make yourself known to other people, let alone God? Thankfully for our friend, even though “we do not know what to pray for as we ought, the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26).

No, Jesus doesn't want to compound the deaf man's discomfort by making a spectacle of him before the crowds. So he takes him aside privately and makes signs that he's going to do something about his problem: he stuffs his fingers into his ears and puts some of his spit on his tongue. It's almost as if Jesus is saying, “Something is about to happen.”

Jesus looks up into heaven and prays. Although it's not the kind of prayer you or I would probably make. Jesus doesn't use words. He just sighs—or groans (it's the same word in Greek). Jesus groans because sometimes our need is so great and our prayers are so gut-wrenching that they get stuck in the back of our throat and come out in a rather guttural way. Sometimes words are too much or not enough. And in those times, the words catch in our throat, similar to the way that the tongue-tied deaf man couldn't quite pray the right way either. But groaning is good enough, and sighing is a simple prayer. Remember: the Spirit prays for us with groans that are too deep for words (Rom. 8:26).

Jesus prays, and then he looks at the man and says, “Ephphatha,” which is the Aramaic word for “Be opened!” (Mark 7:34). “And,” Mark tells us, “his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.” That is, he spoke *rightly*—in a straightforward way (Greek: *orthōs*). Years of isolation and the walls of separation came apart. No longer would his handicap get in the way of his relationship with God or other people because Jesus healed him and made him whole. “Be opened!” he said, and his ears and mouth were opened.

In fact, after the healing, our friend was so excited that he couldn't even keep quiet about it! Bible scholars speak of Jesus' “messianic secret” in Mark and the way that he keeps telling people to keep quiet about his miracles until after his suffering, death, and resurrection. Only in view of the cross can Messiah be rightly understood. Jesus didn't want people to get the wrong idea about him because, as they used to say, “Loose lips sink ships.”

“But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak’ (Mark 7:36-37). All it took was the Word of Jesus: “Be opened!”

“Be opened!” That’s what Jesus said to the deaf man with the speech problem. And that’s what he says to us today: “Be opened!” Some of you may be hard of hearing. Others of us may have *selective* hearing! And a very few of you might even be deaf. (*Aside: One member of our congregation is an audiologist, so if you’re in doubt, you can ask her!*). Yet even if your hearing is perfect, you might still have a hearing problem—not a physical problem, but a spiritual one. For although our ears may be in perfect, working order, we still may not have ears to hear what God says to us in his Word.

It can be hard to hear God speak above the din of distractions, the various voices clamoring for our attention, the fierce winds of false teachings, and the desperation of our own anxious thoughts. It is especially difficult to hear the Lord if we do not spend time daily in Bible study and family devotions. It is nearly impossible to hear God’s voice if we do not gather for worship with other believers. And if we do not believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior, the spiritual silence will be deafening—and deadening. It may well be that our ears are stuffed and our mouths are stopped. We don’t hear what God is saying, so neither do we know what to say in reply. All too often, we are like those doubting disciples of whom Jesus said, “Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear...?” (Mark 8: 17-18). Ultimately, that is what sin is all about: dulling our senses and cutting off the conversation with God.

“Be opened!” Jesus commands! To your ears, he says, “Be opened and hear all the wonderful things God wants to say to you: how he made you and loves you and sent his Son Jesus to die for you, forgive you, and give you eternal life!” Be opened! To your tongue, Jesus says, “Be opened to sing and speak—to pray and praise and proclaim the mighty works of God!” Be opened!

And by the power of his Word, our ears are opened and our tongues are loosed. By the power of his word, our hard hearts are melted. By the power of his Word, the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts to believe in Jesus and receive his message (Rom. 10:17). The Word of Christ accomplishes all things—and does them well. Jesus’ Word heals us and makes us whole (Ps. 107:20). “Be opened!” he says, and that very Word opens our ears and hearts to receive and believe his Word. No less amazing than the healing of the deaf man is the healing of the sinners heart by the forgiveness Christ won for us on the cross. I hope this astonishes and amazes you, for *truly*, Christ has done all things well.

And unlike the deaf man and the crowds in the Decapolis, we have no reason to keep silent or keep the Good News to ourselves. “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise” (Ps. 51:15). Christ has died and risen from the dead! There isn’t any secret anymore—only “good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10). With sins forgiven and hearts made alive by the Word of God, we cannot *help* but speak of what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:20). So, as Jesus commands at the end of Mark’s Gospel, “go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). Or, as we sing in the liturgy: “Thank the Lord and sing His praise/Tell everyone what he has done/Let all who seek the Lord rejoice and proudly bear His name/He recalls His promises and leads His people forth in joy/with shouts of thanksgiving/Alleluia! Alleluia!” (*Lutheran Service Book*). **“Be opened!”** Alleluia! Amen.