

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Pentecost 15B (Proper 18B)
September 5, 2021
Mark 7:31-37

Ephphatha - Be Opened

And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." (Mark 7:34 ESV)

In the Name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world.

While some of you suffer from hearing loss to one degree or another, it's hard to imagine what it's like to be deaf – to live in a world with no music, no voices, no birds singing. You can't hear the sounds of a baby cooing, or your loved ones telling you how much they love you. All you can see are lips moving, but there's no sound. Words must be represented by various signs and gestures. Add to that the danger of not being able to hear the warning of sirens and alarms of various kinds, and you begin to realize just how cut off you really are. But that's not the worst part of deafness. Try to imagine what it would be like to never hear God's words, to not be able to hear the sweet absolution of "I forgive you," to not hear about Jesus, your Savior. Deafness separates you from other people because it so limits your ability to communicate and interact through language and conversation.

The man in our text knew first-hand the isolation that accompanies deafness. Every day, he lived in the chains of sin's curse in his body. Except for those few friends or family members who cared for him, he was cut off from others. He was unable to hear the Scriptures read in the synagogue. He was indeed in a pitiful condition.

Yet, this whole episode is about us as well as the deaf-mute. For his condition describes our own spiritual condition before God. By nature we can't and don't hear Him. In our spiritual deafness, we prefer to listen to other voices - the devil's or the world's or our own. Most certainly, we're deaf to God's Word, for "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them" (1 Cor. 2:14). Our Lord describes it in Isaiah as hearing without understanding or believing (Is. 6:9). It's in one ear and out the other.

You see, the old Adam in each of us doesn't want to hear any words which condemn my sin. Our prideful, sinful self doesn't want to hear that all the good works I'm so proud of are rubbish and that I can't save myself. Like little children, we stop our ears to the hard things that God says to us. We ignore His Word; and we avoid it. We fill up our lives with TV and radio and all sorts of other noises to subtly drown out God's Word. And when our hearing is messed up like that, our speaking gets messed up too. Instead of praying to God without ceasing as we should, too often our tongues are mute and silent, or what they speak is garbled and faithless. In the

end we are no different than this deaf man, isolated from God and from others by our fallen condition.

But in His mercy, Jesus doesn't leave us isolated. Rather, He takes us aside and touches us. Jesus, our Great Physician, is most certainly a hands-on sort of doctor. He doesn't keep His distance or even put a layer of latex between us and Himself. No, He actually takes our human nature on Himself, shares in our flesh and blood, and makes our problems His own. There is no closer contact that the Son of God could make than that, becoming our blood brother.

Jesus took the man aside from the multitude. You see, Jesus didn't do miracles to impress the crowds. He doesn't do miracles to put on a show. Rather, Jesus' entire focus is on the deaf-mute. The same thing is true for you. You're not just another number on some heavenly list. The Lord, who orders the entire universe, still deals with you individually and personally. He takes you aside and lays His hands on you in baptism and in private absolution and speaks to you His words of release. He literally touches you in the Supper of His body and blood to give you life. The Lord is completely there for you with all that He is and all that He has to give.

Then, Jesus does two things, both of which we might think are a little gross. First, He sticks His fingers into the deaf man's ears. Now think about that! Think about what the Son of God was probably getting on His fingers. But that's the way He operates with us. In order to deal with our hearing problem, our refusal to listen to and believe His Word, Jesus is willing to take the gunk of our sin onto Himself and take it away from us. That is the earthy, concrete, human way our Lord goes about saving us and restoring us to wholeness.

And if that weren't enough, Jesus spits and touches the man's tongue with it. Jesus takes from His own mouth and puts into the mouth of this mute so that his speech may be restored. This divine water brings with it the power to unloose the man's tongue and remove its impediment. The mouth of God restores the mouth of this man.

Jesus looks up to heaven, not for His own sake but for the sake of the deaf-mute, to show him "That's where your help comes from" (Ps. 121:1). Then Jesus says to the deaf mute, "Ephphatha," "Be opened, Be released." Immediately his ears are opened and his tongue is released, and he speaks plainly. Jesus was not simply speaking to the man's ears and tongue but to his whole person, "Be released!" For Jesus here is freeing this man from his bondage to the debilitating power of sin. Jesus' miracle is more than just evidence of his power over bodily ailments; it is evidence of His triumph over death and the devil himself. Jesus' words shatter the chains of our fallen and broken humanity.

However, that victory would not come without a price. For as Jesus is about to speak, He sighs, He groans. Our Lord groans because He makes our pain and loneliness and troubles and sin His own. He groaned and cried out and was spitefully spit upon for us on the cross. The cost of our healing is His death. And yet through that death Jesus is not defeated but victorious. For in so doing He breaks the power of sin's curse. Jesus overcame all that makes us sigh and groan in this fallen world and put it to death. And by rising bodily from the grave, He has restored your

body to life that is whole and immortal and imperishable—no more deafness (or even hearing aids), no more blindness and disease and death. That resurrection life will be revealed to you and to the whole creation when Christ returns on the Last Day. Isaiah prophesied of Christ when he said, "In that day the deaf shall hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness. The humble also shall increase their joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel" (Is. 29:18).

All thanks and praise be to God, then, that He has sent His Son Jesus to open our ears and unloose our tongues, that we may believe in Him with our hearts and confess the faith with our mouths and be saved. In fact, Jesus is still sticking His fingers into your ears. For in the Scriptures the term "finger of God" is a reference to the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when Christ preaches and teaches His words to you, the finger of God is being put into your ears, the Holy Spirit is coming to you to open your ears and your hearts and your minds, that you may believe in Christ and receive His life and salvation.

And in the Sacraments, Jesus is also at work to open your ears and loose your tongue. After all, Baptism is simply water and words from God's mouth. Such divine water and words are applied to you at the font to rescue you from your bondage to the evil one and to set you free as a child of God. When you were baptized, Jesus said His "Ephphatha" to you. "Be opened, be released." You were marked with the sign of the holy cross by which Jesus broke the chains of hell for you. The body and blood of Christ are placed on your tongue for the forgiveness of your sins, that you may remain free and endure in the faith to the end. That's why the prayer services, Matins and Vespers, begin with these words from the Psalms, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." (Ps. 51:15).

The people in the Gospel certainly declared Jesus' praise, even when Jesus had told them not yet to tell what He had done. In fact, the more He commanded them, the more widely they proclaimed it, so astonished were they to see this. They couldn't hold it in. So it is for all of us who rejoice in the works of Christ. We can't keep it to ourselves; we want others to know about it. We want others who are presently deaf to Christ's Word, as we once were, to be touched by Jesus—to have their ears opened and their tongues loosed, so that they also may join us in proclaiming the praises of Jesus, who has rescued us from deathly silence and has caused the joyous melody of the Gospel to sound in our ears.

God grant each of you, even in the midst of the ups and downs of your life, to say of Jesus, "He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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