

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity, A ✕ D 2009

Mark 7:31-37 Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. ³⁴ And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵ And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Certainly there was another way. Even though the deaf and mute man's friends brought him to Jesus, asking the Lord to lay His hand on the man, they never could've imagined this kind of laying-on of hands. This is not the kind of Jesus to capture in a cute painting or put on a greeting card. It's awkward. To heal the deaf and tongue-tied man, Jesus doesn't quite lay a hand on him, not a whole hand, anyway. Instead, taking him aside, Jesus put His fingers in the man's ears, and, spitting, pressed a finger onto his tongue. Looking up to heaven, with a sigh, Jesus commanded the ears and tongue: "Ephphatha," be opened. So the man's deaf ears were opened, and his bound tongue loosed to speak freely.

2 That's not a very popular picture of Jesus. There is no poem that bemoans the times in life when it's difficult to hear, only to look back and discover that that's when Jesus had His fingers in your ears. There's no pious prayer that asks Jesus into your ears or dedicates your tongue to Him. It's popular to want a relationship with Jesus, but rarely the kind described in sacred Scripture. The relationship with Jesus that's popular is one where He'll be a friend like a fishing buddy and laugh at your dumb jokes and tell you to pull His fingers, or the one where you can share all your hopes and dreams,

fears and foibles with Jesus, just like with your girlfriends, or the kind where Jesus will befriend you and encourage you without judging you or caring too much about your seemingly insignificant vices. But what about this relationship: the one where Jesus jabs His fingers in your ears and presses a finger onto your tongue? No, you wanted a neat, tidy relationship, not an invasion of your personal bubble. This Jesus, admittedly the historical Jesus, the unimagined Jesus, is intrusive. You want some Jesus, but not like this, not rude and offensively in your personal space.

3 You want some religion, too, perhaps, but not like this. You want the kind of religion that functions like a social club, the kind everyone who's anyone belongs to. You want the kind of religion that doesn't ask too much of you, either from your wallet or your lifestyle. You want the kind of religion that fits into its own compartment, the kind that is worth about an hour per week and little more, not the kind that affects every aspect of your life. You want some religion, but not like this, not intrusive, not demanding your whole self, not calling you to be someone different from who you naturally were.

4 Just because ear drums vibrate and tongues wag does not mean ears and lips work as they were intended. What good are ears that can hear if they are filled with the venom that flows freely from the mouths of friends and coworkers, degrading others, telling of weekend exploits and conquests, spreading rumors, hurting others' reputations? What good are ear drums that vibrate, ear bones that rattle, ears that hear, if they don't vibrate, rattle, and resonate with the Word of God? Whether they hear or not, ears that are not filled with the Word of God might as well be as deaf as this man's in the Gospel reading.

5 What good are lips and tongues that can craft perfect syllables when those syllables are put into words used to inflict hurt on your spouse, to belittle your children, to talk back to your parents? What good are vocal cords that can shape pitch and inflection into very intricate sounds if those sounds are used to spread gossip, to hurt reputations, to whisper to yourself self-righteous fantasies? What good are tongues free from impediment if they are not used to speak words of forgiveness and comfort to those who have wronged you, to defend and speak well of those being gossiped about? What good are lips that pour forth intelligible sounds if those sounds are not used to catechize your children, to teach them the faith both by instruction and by example? What good are vocal cords that vibrate freely if they don't vibrate with praise, prayer, and thanksgiving? Whether they speak words or not, tongues not proclaiming the Word of God might as well be as bound as this man's in the Gospel reading.

6 The problem is deeper than your ears or your tongue. They may be instruments of sin and wickedness, but they are not the source. "Out of the abundance of the heart," diagnosed the One who healed the deaf man, "the mouth speaks." "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." The infection runs throughout you. Speaking, you do not speak the Word of God. Hearing, you do not hear the Word of God. Repent.

7 The infection runs to your very core, into your very nature, but so does the cure. Jesus didn't just stick His fingers into the man's ears and mouth to heal him. He went deeper. He took the man's entire humanity onto Himself. He, the very Word of God, the eternal, uncreated Word of God who was with God in the beginning, who is God,

through whom everything was created, took more than just the man's ears or tongue. He took more than just your dead ears and lifeless tongue. He took complete human flesh, complete human nature. It's intrusive, invasive, an imposition in the personal space of all humanity. God took on human flesh. But it was the only solution. The incarnate, enfleshed Word of God took all of humanity's sinfulness upon Himself. And He suffered every consequence, every punishment for that sin. His ears were deaf, His tongue silent, His heart stopped, as He died on the cross.

8 Jesus could have healed the deaf man with the inability to speak through any means He chose. But He chose to work through very particular means, very tactile means: the press of His fingers into ears and onto a tongue, and the wetness of his spittle. He could deliver faith and forgiveness of sins through any way He might choose, but He has appointed very specific means. Faith is not what you conjure up within yourself, a decision for Jesus, a commitment to God, or any such nonsense. Faith comes from outside you, stuck—quite literally—into your ears. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing [comes] through the word of Christ. It's what ears were made for—to hear the Word of God.

9 The solution is even more invasive, more intrusive, more in your personal space than the problem. Jesus has opened your ears to hear His Word. He has opened your ears with the *epiphatha* of Holy Baptism, creating life where there was only death, creating hearing where there was only deafness, creating speech where there was only babbling. He delivers His forgiveness as He takes you aside, apart from the crowd, and has His minister place his hand on your head, right in your personal space, so that there's no mistaking for whom these words are spoken, "I forgive you." And the Word of

God presses more than a finger onto your tongue. He presses His Body onto your tongue, pours His Blood down your throat, for the forgiveness of your sins. Be opened. Continue to hear the Word of God for you. Be loosed. Continue to declare the wonderful things God has done and does right here for you. He has done all things well. He even makes your deaf ears able to hear His Word and your mute tongue able to pray to Him and praise Him for His gifts.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Pastor Jeff Hemmer
Hope, Jerseyville