

Pentecost 14 (Proper 18B), September 6, 2009  
Church of the Reformation—Affton, MO  
Text: John 7:31—37

### Ephphatha!

So, how is your hearing? That's not just a question asked by Whitey Herzog in ads for hearing aids. Nor is it a question asked by parents or spouses concerning what seems to be selected hearing and response. Rather, it is the question Saint Mark is asking as he records the miracle of Jesus healing a deaf man.

Mark doesn't tell anything about the man whose ears and tongue don't work. No name of this patient is recorded. He is one of many whose hearing is impaired, living in silence, struggling daily to communicate with people whose ears *do* work. The sounds of laughter, music, or even the Word of God are strangers to his ears. His impaired hearing makes speaking with clarity a great difficulty.

Perhaps not so strange is the way the Great Physician and the patient met. Jesus had been in the region of Tyre and Sidon, where He had healed a Gentile Syrophenician woman's daughter. His travels now take Him to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis, ten no-name towns in Gentile territory. The Decapolis is where Jesus had cast a legion of demons out of a man and into a herd of pigs, who subsequently jumped off a cliff into the sea. So Jesus is known in this area. That's how Jesus and the man whose ears and tongue don't work get together.

Friends who believe enough about Jesus bring their friend to Him, begging Jesus: "Won't you please lay Your hand on our friend and heal him? His ears and tongue don't work. But we know what You did to those demons, so we figured you might be able to help our friend."

Without making a show of things, Jesus takes the man aside, away from the crowds and the press. Unlike so-called “faith healers” of our day, Jesus doesn’t use the misfortune of others to draw attention to Himself. Jesus is there completely for the man whose ears and tongue don’t work.

Using a bit of sign language, Jesus reaches out to this man in a language he understands. Jesus takes His fingers and sticks them in the man’s ears. He spits on His fingers and touches the man’s tongue. He touches what is broken with the Creator’s touch, for when Jesus touches someone they are touched by the hand of God.

How different from our day when machines and computers monitor every aspect of life and health, and yet there is very little or no human touch. Our God is not like that; He is a hands-on God, who stepped down from His glory in heaven to take on our human flesh and bone, to dwell among us and touch us through His own true humanity—fingers in the ears, spitting, grabbing tongues. He deals with us as the human creatures that we are. He deals with us in a hands-on way, in the grubby, ordinary, earthy, everyday way of our human existence.

Make no mistake about that day in the area of the Decapolis, it was the fingers of God that touched the man’s ears and tongue. That’s why Jesus looks up to heaven as sign language to man about the source of his healing. Jesus is the go-between, the mediator between God and man; He is the one praying for us, touching us with God’s touch. Jesus sighs, groans, because He knows how deep our brokenness is; and He knows what price He will have to pay to fix it. The cost of this health care is far beyond our puny arguments. Jesus knows the cost of this healing is a cross,

His death, His life given up for the life of the world. Jesus knows our human suffering and sorrow; He knows our weakness. When He groans and sighs on our behalf, they are the same groanings with which the Holy Spirit prays for us in our weakness.

Jesus then speaks the word, “**Ephphatha!**”—Aramaic for “Be opened. Be released. Be free.”

Here is holistic healing at its best: Jesus speaks not only to the ears and tongue of this man, but to the whole man, releasing him from everything that held him bound and captive. After all, Jesus comes to proclaim release to the captives. To those bound in sin and death Jesus speaks the liberating Word of “Ephphatha!”

And the Word of Jesus does what it says: ears once deaf now hear, tongues once silent, now speak and sing. What did this man first speak? St. Mark does not record this, for the focus is always on Jesus, not the miracle or those healed. With a man just beginning to speak, how ironic that Jesus puts a gag order on the group that day. Jesus does not want to be known simply as a wonder worker, an ear and mouth specialist.

No, the miracles of Jesus are a whole lot more. They are signs that God has come to us to touch us with His forgiveness. Centuries before Christ, Isaiah (35:4c) had prophesied: “**Your God will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.**” The lame will leap like the agile deer. Mute tongues will shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the dry wilderness, streams of water in the wilderness. Burning sand will break out in bubbling springs.

And God did come to us in Christ Jesus. He came to save us by absorbing into Himself all the sin and evil and brokenness—all that has gone wrong with us, all that has come into the creation because our Fall. Jesus came to take up our sickness and diseases into His own body, to battle the demons that darken our lives, to take up the devastation that crushes us. Jesus came to free us from everything that binds us, that imprisons us, that keeps us from being God’s free children. He came to unchain us from sin, from death, from the devil. He came to bring in a new creation with His own dying and rising, a new creation when **“the deaf shall hear the words of the book, and the eyes of blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness. [A new creation when] the humble shall increase their joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.”** (Isaiah 29:18-19).

That is why Jesus didn’t want anyone to say anything about what happened. It was all too small, too soon. There was more—much more—of Jesus to come: His death on the cross; His open, empty tomb; His ascension to glory.; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And then His disciples would speak openly and plainly.

On this day in the Decapolis, the friends of the man once deaf and mute start speaking. The more Jesus tries to quiet them, the more they speak, for they are a people overwhelmed at the power of Jesus’ words. They can’t hold it in; they are driven to speak. With a simple word Jesus has done what no man could do, and yet He did it in such a human way. Through His humanity came the power of God to save, to set free, to release from bondage. No wonder their song, **“He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”**

And we have even more to say about Jesus than they did—greater things than making ears and tongues work again. Jesus has died for us, risen from the dead for us, reigns over all things for us. He has spoken His “Ephphatha” to us in our Baptisms. He has opened our ears to hear His Word of forgiveness. He has opened our mouths and anointed our tongues to sing His praises, to pray to Him, and to proclaim His wonderful deeds. He places His body and blood on our tongues for our forgiveness, His Word on our hearts and minds. He saves us because Jesus is the one who is at work in and through us, you and me. And He does everything well. You can trust Him to do everything well with you.

Henry V. Gerike