

Ephphatha – Be Opened

Mark 7:31-37

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

September 6, 2009 – Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. By the time our Lord concluded His earthly ministry, it had become abundantly evident to all – at least to those who were paying attention – that Jesus was One Person who wasn't fearful of reaching out in compassion toward even the most hapless and forlorn of persons. Do you recall the account of the blind man, Bartimaeus, whose only plea was, "Lord, have mercy?" His cry to Jesus stopped our Lord in His tracks, so that He asked him: "What do you want Me to do for you?" Bartimaeus replied, "Rabboni, that I may receive my sight." And immediately the man was healed and began to follow after Jesus.

Then there was the woman who had been suffering from an issue of blood for 12 years. Seeing Jesus walking nearby, she stretched out her hand and touched His garment. At that moment Jesus said He felt power leave His body – and immediately the woman was healed. Amidst all the commotion and turmoil of that excited crowd, Jesus took time once again to stop and have compassion. Would you have expected Him who alone is the perfect Fulfillment of every aspect of the Law of God to have done anything else? He is, after all, the One who embodies "pure and undefiled religion" which exhibits itself in the visitation of orphans and widows in their time of trouble – and manifests itself by extending compassion to poor, hurting sinners.

And then there's the man in this morning's Gospel – the deaf, mute man who had been brought to Jesus by some of his friends. After bringing him to Jesus, his friends then pleaded with our Lord to put His hands on him to bless and heal him. Like the woman with the issue of blood, this man's friends had faith to believe Jesus would be able to help him – that Jesus could, in fact, open the man's ears and loosen his tongue. They were trusting in the mercy and compassion of Jesus to bring this man some much needed relief from his ailments. Perhaps they'd been part of the multitude Jesus had earlier fed with only a few fish and barley loaves and were now seeking His help for their friend. Maybe all they wanted was to witness another miracle. But regardless, now the deaf, mute man was standing before Jesus, hoping to be healed.

So, Jesus took the man aside from the multitudes, put His fingers in his ears, spat, then touched his tongue. Finally, looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed, spoke to the man and said, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately, the Scriptures tell us, the man's ears *were* opened, his tongue *was* loosed, and he was able to speak plainly for the first time in his life! Unless you happen to deaf and mute, I don't suppose there's any way you could ever fully appreciate what the restoration of these senses meant to this man – indeed, one can only imagine. What would it be like not to be able to hear or speak? After all, sensory deprivation – keeping a person confined so he can neither hear nor see anything – is a technique that's been used successfully for years to break the mind and spirit of war prisoners. Hidden away in some secluded place, where even their own speech is absorbed by the acoustics of the room, their voice becomes meaningless.

Imagine not having the luxury of being able to associate actions with the sounds that accompany them. Imagine not knowing what wind sounds like as it blows through the branches of a tree. Imagine not being able to hear or enjoy the crashing of ocean waves upon the sand. And even more horribly, imagine being deaf and mute with regard to God's Word. Imagine hearing all the various philosophies of men and their satanically conceived ideas about life, death, hope, despair, joy and sadness – and then never having the opportunity to hear or understand the real truth about such matters – about how, in the cross and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus, death has been swallowed up in victory – about how hope, along with faith and love, are the things of God that will remain when all else fails – and how, though there may still be sorrow at the close of the day, true joy will always come in the morning of a new life in Christ.

Imagine being able to hear with your ears the well-meaning condolences of a friend in the midst of suffering or illness, but not being able to hear the voice of Jesus – that voice which assures you that even though there may be trouble in this world, He has overcome it with His life, suffering, death and resurrection. Imagine being able to speak to others about the beauty of our world, but not being able to sing the praises of Him who created it because you steadfastly refused to believe in God's existence or creative power. Imagine being able

to speak only to those with a sympathetic heart about your needs and problems, but not being able to take those same petitions to God in prayer. Chrysostom, one of the Early Church “fathers” who was known as the “silver tongued preacher” once wrote: “To be separated from God – that is, to be deaf to His Word – is a far greater punishment than even a thousand hells.”

Dear friends, like the deaf, mute man Jesus healed in this morning’s Gospel, all of us, at one time, *were* both deaf and mute with regard to the Word of God. Our ears *were* closed to the cross and resurrection of Jesus – and to the comfort only they can bring – and our mouths *were* loosed only to sing the praises of the things of men. Our lot in life *was* “greater than a thousand hells” for we couldn’t hear the voice of God – nor were we able to call out to Him. Like the prisoner held in solitary confinement, soon our voice had become meaningless because we realized there was no one to hear it, and no one to respond to it. Isaiah, described our hellish condition perfectly in this scathing indictment, when he wrote: “Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed – lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.”

Like the deaf, mute man, all of you – to be sure, all of us – were at one time deaf and mute regarding the Word of God. That was when Jesus spoke His Ephphatha and worked His miracle over your ears and mouths. In a word, He gave you ears to hear – a voice to confess His name and to sing His praises. He put His Word into your mind and His song into your heart. Now you are able to reject all the various worldly philosophies concerning life, death, hope, despair, joy and sadness, because the ears God gave you to hear started hearing the voice of the One who laid down His life for you – who gives life meaning even in death – who takes away despair and replaces it with hope – who alone is able to turn sadness into joy. Though you still continue to hear the condolences of friends with regard to your sufferings and illnesses, now you find even greater solace in the voice of the One who has borne all that sickness and infirmity in your place – who says to you, “take courage, for I have overcome the world.” And though you rightly speak of the beauty of our world, now you are able to take even greater joy in singing the praises of that One

who created and sustains it all. And finally, though you find solace in being able to voice your needs and problems to those who have a sympathetic heart and open ears, now you are able to find a far greater peace as you take your petitions to the very heart of God in prayer.

Your ears, dear friends, your ears have been opened to the saving grace of Jesus proclaimed to you in the Word of God and bestowed on you in His Sacraments. Now that your ears have been opened, your voice cannot do anything but confess what you have heard. Earlier I asked you to imagine what it would be like to be both deaf and mute. Imagine now the joy of hearing and speaking for the first time! I dare say no one would ever be able to silence you again. How much greater and more fervently then ought you to speak of Him who called you out of your own self-inflicted deafness and muteness into a world filled with the sounds of His grace? Bartimaeus was pleased to praise the name of Jesus, even as he called out for help in his time of need. The woman afflicted with the issue of blood, having heard of Jesus’ kindness and compassion – and having come to believe what she’d heard about Him – reached out her hand toward Him as He passed nearby – in one sense to be healed, but in another to praise the name of this One who alone can heal all that ails us.

During His earthly ministry, it’s well-documented that Jesus reached out and had compassion on the most hapless and forlorn. And so it is still in our day that our Savior continues reaching out to sinners such as you and me. Right up to this very moment His Word continues to go forth, His Ephphatha is spoken, ears are opened to hear of His grace, and tongues are loosed to confess His name and sing His praises. How great an honor God has given us that we are able to speak of Him who’s called us out of the deafness and muteness of our sin-filled world into a new creation – a world filled with the sounds of His grace! What joy is ours that we can now raise our voices and say – as we did only a few moments ago in the words of this morning’s sermon hymn: “Praise, all you people, the name so holy – of Him who does such wondrous things! All that has being, to praise him solely, with happy hearts, its “Amen” sings. Children of God, with angel host, praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost! Alleluia! Alleluia!” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds, by faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.