

The Deaf Shall Hear and the Tongue of the Mute Sing for Joy

Text: Mark 7:31-38

Hymn: "Word of God, Come Down to Earth" (LSB 545)

Hearing and speaking go together. Maybe we don't think about this too much, but it's true: Hearing and speaking go together.

As many of you know, my wife Jill is a physician assistant at the emergency room at Medical City Hospital. When she was going through her training, on her internal medicine rotation, she saw a patient diagnosed with mono. And she went out into the hall to consult with her supervising doctor as to what to prescribe and what to tell the man in terms of what to expect in the coming days. The doctor was in a hurry to see her next patient and so she starts rattling off all these instructions while Jill is struggling to keep all that the doctor is saying straight in her head. And now Jill goes back into the room and proceeds to restate to the patient what she's just barely heard from the doctor. She gives the man his prescription, tells him how often he's supposed to take it, whether with or without food, and then she says, "Oh, and one more thing, no physical activity for *forty-six weeks*." And the man's eyes get huge and he says, "No physical activity for *forty-six weeks*?!" And now Jill realizes how strange that sounds and quickly replays in her head the last words the doctor had told her and she comes back and says, "You know, I must mean *four to six weeks*; yeah, that's it, *four to six weeks*. Sorry about that." Hearing and speaking go together.

If the hearing is off, the speech will be off, too. And we see the situation in our text before us. We have a man who can't hear and who also has a serious speech

impediment. This man has a serious problem, probably from birth: He can't *spea*k correctly because he's never been able to *hear*.

Not that long ago, society would have added insult to injury by referring to such an unfortunate person as deaf and *dumb*. "Dumb," of course, did originally mean simply, "unable to speak," as in Dryden's line, "But safe repose without an air of breath / Dwells here, and a *dumb* quiet next to death" (*Metamorphoses*, Book XI). But over time it has become a term denoting a lack of intelligence, as in *Dumb and Dumber*. But it's not that this man isn't smart. His problem is he can't hear. And if you can't hear, how difficult it must be to speak intelligibly!

Most of us, if not all of us, have encountered people that struggle with hearing. And if you know anyone, or have known anyone, that had difficulty hearing from a very early age, you know how difficult it is for them to communicate, even when their hearing is restored. It can take years of speech therapy for them to communicate and enunciate in an effective way. For all these reasons the man in our text, because he can't hear and he can't speak, is cut off from those he loves. He's cut off from his family. He's cut off from his community. But most tragically he's cut off from hearing the Word of God.

All of which raises questions for us: When sickness, disability, whether mental or physical, is before us, what do we think? Do we feel pity and compassion or are we hard and calloused toward it? Do we assume that the person who has trouble speaking is stupid and proceed to talk to him like a baby or do we have enough moral imagination to account for the person's handicap without insulting his intelligence?

More importantly, how often does it occur to us that such afflictions are a sign of a more fundamental problem, a problem that besets all of us, and that more

fundamental problem is sin and the bondage to sin to which the devil has subjected the world? Throughout the Gospel of Mark, we find Jesus not only healing people but casting out demons and not only casting out demons but casting them out first. In every new place to which Jesus goes, an exorcism is nearly always his lead-off miracle. And this points to the fact that our biggest problem is a spiritual one, of being subject to the prince of this world and to the powers that are opposed to God. Everything gone wrong in our world, in fact—deafness, speech impediments, sickness, disease, death—is ultimately Satan at work.

God, after all, is a God of life, a God of healing, a God of health. Satan is the one behind illness and disability. But rarely do we think in those terms. Why? Because we look at things too often in a strictly human way, deluded, even today in a world thrown on its heels by a global pandemic, into thinking we are ultimately in control, that we're just a computer program, a diet, a vaccine, an election away from solving all our real problems. And we discount the spiritual and the demonic, forces much more powerful than ourselves and which before our very eyes continue to spoil and destroy God's good creation. One thing the Holy Spirit wants us to sure of about this man is that Satan is at work in his life—plugging up his ears, tying his tongue.

But what does this man have going for him? He has friends. "And they brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment and they begged him to lay his hands on him." We're not told who the "they" are. But the "they" were people who not only knew this man's condition but knew Jesus was a holy man and a healer. Perhaps they had heard him preach or witnessed him performing other mighty deeds. These people loved this man, saw his condition, and brought him to Jesus.

What a marvelous example to us! When we see our loved ones, our friends, overcome and distraught by the trials and tribulations that are part and parcel of a world broken by sin, we could throw up our hands and say, “There’s nothing I can do about it!” or we could realize that the universal solution to every problem is Christ and His Word. We could encourage and invite and even drag, if necessary, our friends and family to where Jesus promises to be.

That’s what this man’s friends did. They begged Jesus to heal the man, so great is their love and their faith. And then we’re told that Jesus took the man away from the crowd privately. Isn’t that interesting? Perhaps Jesus didn’t want the man to be distracted. But I think there’s something greater than that going on. “God so loved the world...” But when it comes to our salvation, God does not deal with us as part of some impersonal group project. He loves each of us individually. He pulls each of us away from the crowd. Throughout the Gospels—from the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law to the woman with the issue of blood to the raising of Jairus’ daughter to the exorcism of the demoniac living among the tombs—we discover a Jesus who, though on a mission to save everyone, stops and takes the time to deal with each person as though that person were the only one in the world.

And God loves you the same way. God loved *you* so that He sent His Son into the world. God took on flesh and blood to deal with people, with sinners, with individuals, you and me. And that’s why in the church we don’t do as every freshman seminarian proposes and fly over the Super Bowl in a helicopter and dump gallons of water over the fans while saying the words, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” No, we bring the water and the Word to people one at a time, as

each is brought to the baptismal font. When you were baptized, Jesus took you away from the crowd and saved you—individually—as if you were the only person in the world He came to save.

We read on. It's hard for Jesus to communicate with this man. And so what does he do? He uses sign language. He puts his fingers into his ears. And, after spitting, he touches the man's tongue. He's indicating to the man, with concrete gestures, what He's about to do for the man. And looking up to heaven, Jesus sighs—he groans—he acknowledges that all of the pain, all of the suffering, all of the sickness, all of the cancer, all of the heart disease, all of the AIDS, all sin and all sin's consequences that the devil is responsible for bringing into the world are foreign and contrary to a holy God and a perfect creation. He sighs, his heart aching and breaking.

And then he speaks. The Word-made-flesh speaks a word: Ephphatha! It's an Aramaic word and it means, "Be opened." But take note: the Aramaic word and the Greek translation of it are singular. Aramaic and Greek have a way of distinguishing between "you" singular and "you" plural. In Texas, we do, too—it's the difference between "you" and 'y'all." Well, Jesus doesn't say, "Y'all, be opened," which we would expect him to do if he were speaking to the ears. He says, "You (singular), be opened," because He's addressing the whole man: Ears, be opened to hear My Word. Heart, be opened to believe My Word. Tongue, be opened to proclaim my Word. All of you, be opened!

And be opened *now*. Be opened *completely*. Jesus speaks the word—the powerful Word, life-giving Word, life-changing Word—and Jesus' powerful Word does what it says. His ears are opened. His tongue is loosed. And the man speaks plainly.

Immediately, the man could hear clearly. *Immediately*, the man could speak clearly. He didn't have to go to speech therapy for years. He spoke plainly immediately. Do you realize what a miracle that is!

Jesus speaks. And it is done. Ephphatha, be opened. This man was a real man with a real issue and Jesus really spoke words of healing and this man was really healed. And this man represents each and every one of us. Every one of us was born lost in the trespasses of his own sins. We were spiritually deaf to the word of God. We were spiritually tongue-tied, unable to speak truthfully to God or about God. But God came to us, the God who took on flesh and blood, who bled and died on the Cross, announcing, "It is finished," that is, "Ephphatha! Kingdom of God, be opened for sinners!" He came to us in the waters of Holy Baptism and said, "Ephphatha, be opened!" Ears, be opened to the Word of God in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! Heart, be opened to the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. Lips, be opened to confess, in good times and bad, that Jesus is the God who has does all things well!

God's love for you is so great that He sent His Son for you, to forgive your sins, to absolve you of every time you have stopped up your ears to the Word of God and every time you have failed to make the good confession and every time you have opened your mouth and cursed or slandered or, worse, made a false confession regarding the one true God. Jesus Christ gave his body and shed his blood for you and for your forgiveness. He took on your biggest problems—the devil, sin, and death—and at the Cross He overcame them once and for all.

Even today God has a word for you. It is Ephphatha. Be opened. A word of life, of love, forgiveness, and hope to sustain you until that day when our Lord will, instead of looking up to heaven, come down from it and say, "Ephphatha: Grave, be opened!" And He will raise you to new, sinless, healthy, vigorous, everlasting life with Him in the kingdom that has no end.

"O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." Amen.

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