

“Be Opened!”
Mark 7:31-37
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 9, 2018

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, *And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is “Be opened.” And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.... And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last week we mentioned that we need not be so focused on physical health and temporal blessings, but rather our minds should be set on things above and eternal well-being, and all other things will be added unto us. That basic truth helps us read aright the Scriptures and helps us interpret well our text for today.

To read with a focus on *eternal* well-being does not try and reinterpret miracles of physical health – Jesus truly in history healed a man who was deaf and mute! That historical truth need not be downplayed with a more ‘spiritual’ interpretation.

But, to read with a focus on eternal well-being does help us understand *why* Jesus physically healed a man deaf and mute. When we are too *temporally*-minded, we wonder, “How will Jesus copy this miracle for me? – what ailment will I have that Jesus will go beyond medicine to miraculously heal?” But, when we are *eternally*-minded, we consider how Jesus – through his miracle – spoke volumes about

a much better and more eternal gospel: that God heard the cries of his people, sent the Messiah as promised, and has opened our ears and hearts to the good news of our salvation and the guarantee of our resurrection.

Whenever you hear of the deaf in Scripture, it ought remind you of two complementary images that well-depict God's relationship with man. The first image is the faithful's *pre-Messianic* concern that God would be deaf toward them because of their sin. When you don't have the promised Messiah tangibly to grasp for your forgiveness and comfort of oneness with God, where is there any certainty that the Lord is willing to hear your cry for mercy? And, if the Lord is not willing to hear your cry, isn't it because he's holy and you're unholy? So, if he refuses to hear your cry, are you not dead in your trespasses and sins?!

Thus, throughout the Old Testament, we hear cries of the faithful pleading with God not to turn a deaf ear to them on account of their unholiness. Even in our service this morning, the words of the psalmist, "To you, O Lord, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me, lest, if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit." (Notice the fear of their sin separating them from God. Shouldn't that holy fear be ours?!) The psalm continues, "Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help, *when I lift up my hands toward your most holy sanctuary.*"

In this summer's class, we studied briefly the ancient posture of prayer – the priest's lifting up of hands – not as a sign of piety, but as a sign of great need and dependence upon the God who may either turn a *deaf* ear in holiness, or a *listening* ear in mercy, so that the faithful may continue on with the psalmist, “Bless-ed be the Lord!, for he has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy!” Or, as we say it weekly in *our* holy sanctuary, “Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer!**”

What a confident cry can be ours – not because we have somehow *proven* our own holiness to match God's, somehow *improved* our heart and life to be one with God's... but rather because now we have a Messiah who has come in human likeness, the flesh-and-blood guarantee that God has heard the cries of His people and – even before they cried – had already *made* plans and now has *acted* on those plans to save us with his atoning sacrifice on the cross.

And how do we know that Messiah has come? – through signs and wonders...just as the prophets of Old foretold: consider the sign and wonder prophesied by Isaiah in our Old Testament reading: “He will come and save you. *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped... and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.*” Is it coincidental that the miracle of our gospel text not only mimics, but fulfills the Old Testament promise that

when the world's Messiah comes, the deaf will hear and the mute will sing for joy?

But now this brings us to the second scriptural image we ought consider when hearing of the healing of the deaf. For, the first image – of a holy God turning a deaf ear to unholy people – may be a very common concern of the people of Old, but it does not fit our text. Certainly, such a healing points us to the Messiah who has come, but the image of our text is not of that Messiah opening *God's* ears! Rather, when we see such an image of deafness no longer in the *prophetic* age, but now in the *messianic* age, we ought consider how often that Messiah not only calls us sinners to *have* opened ears, but then works to *open* them! (If Isaiah's prophecy were only about those physically blind and deaf and mute, Jesus still has work to do... there are more blind, deaf, mute to be healed! But, Isaiah's prophecy is ultimately about Christ bringing the sinner to rejoice in the Gospel!)

Do we not read in the Scriptures how often Jesus says, "All who have ears to hear, let him hear!" No matter what is going on in daily life, friends... no matter the joys, the problems, the frustrations, the busy-ness, that Scriptural refrain ought reverberate in every room of our house and day of our life: "All who have ears to hear, let him hear!" How urgent is our need to hear what the Messiah and his couriers have to say to us! In fact, just last week, in *that* account

which immediately precedes this one, *then* Jesus said, “Hear me, all of you, and understand!”

You see, it’s *our* deafness, our spiritual deafness, that Jesus now highlights and mercifully attacks and overcomes. He did not just come to die on the cross, appease the Father’s holy wrath toward sin, then leave us deaf to the good news. Rather, he came both to earn our salvation and also to open our ears and heart to it! “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ!” – and what is that word of Christ, but word of His suffering, sacrifice, atonement in our place and his victory that will lead to our overcoming of the grave.

Yes, faith in all of that comes to those who have been given ears to hear, as Christ (as we heard last week) uses means from outside of us and puts that medication into us to benefit our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, that our mouths might confess his holy name.

Isn’t that the image we hear of today? How is this deaf and mute one supposed to gin up help from within? Rather, from outside of him comes the divine help that is needed. It comes from above, through the work of the Christ in tangible ways, and it brings benefit that changes this man. Now, again, if we think of this not in terms of the gospel being about physical health, but about spiritual health and eternal well-being, isn’t this the change Christ brings to us deaf and miserable sinners? He who once opened ears physically to prove

himself the Messiah, now opens ears spiritually that we might have far more than *temporal* benefit, but *eternal* life with God forever.

Indeed, we confess this miracle in light of what He does for us not just here below, but with mind fixed on things above. This is why Jesus commanded those in our text to tell no one – for the more they ran to tell of the miracle *without the context of the cross*, the more people would set minds on things below and look for their own version of temporal benefit. But Christ comes not with the great goal of opening *physical* hearing, but with the great goal of opening our ears and hearts to the good news of our *salvation*.

In fact, the one word of Jesus this entire text records – *only one word from his mouth!* – is that one about the deaf being opened: *Ephphatha*. It's translated for us into its Greek equivalent, *διανοιχθητι*, which means “be opened.” And, if you read this ‘spiritually,’ you mark well how so many other places this *διανοιχθητι* (or, at least its root word) is used in the Scriptures, it is used to denote the opening up of ears, hearts, and minds to the gospel of eternal life. For example, on the night of Jesus’ resurrection, he started to explain to the disciples on the road all the prophetic word regarding the Messiah to come and bring eternal life... and, when he broke bread before them, “their eyes were opened - *διανοιγω* - and they recognized it was Jesus.” And when they thought to themselves about all he had told them, those disciples recounted how “he opened to us - *διανοιγω* - all the

Scriptures.” And just a few verses later, teaching *all* his disciples, beginning with Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms, Jesus “opened their minds – *διανοιγω* – to understand the Scriptures.” Again, in the book of Acts, as Lydia listened to Paul proclaim the Gospel, the Scriptures say God opened her heart – *διανοιγω* – “opened her heart *to pay attention* (the text says) to all that was spoken by Paul.”

Ought we not desire that our hearts be opened, our ears be opened, our minds be opened, to pay attention to this Jesus... and our mouths be opened with the confession of his Gospel? For he has done all things well. He once made the deaf hear and the mute speak and proved himself to be the Messiah. And, being that long awaited Christ, this Jesus took to the cross and willingly took our sins and our punishment as the Father turned a deaf ear to him – “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” – turned a deaf ear to *him*, so that the Father need never turn a deaf ear to you. And, as if that wasn’t enough, the risen Christ has continually worked through Word and Sacraments to open your hearts to this eternal life that he purchased for you, baptized you into, and now desires to sustain you in... he works through Word and Sacrament to sustain you in all of that and bring anew to your ears and hearts those Scriptural words that have long comforted God’s people: “Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with

vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”

All who have ears to hear know that He once came with vengeance to save. All whose ears and hearts are opened to understand know that he will come again in glory to deliver the fulfillment of that eternal life with God. Thus, with hearts attuned to His Word, and with opened lips and loosened tongues, the faithful confess the certain hope He has put within them, and they boldly and confidently pray, “Lord, in your mercy; hear our prayer!”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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September 9, 2018