

“He Makes the Deaf to Hear and the Mute to Speak”

Mark 7:31-37

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 5, 2021

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

Our text, *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.*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

All of Jesus’ healing miracles, proclaim a deeper layer of theological truth. As we’ve said before, Jesus’ healing miracles are not just a show to make you eager that he can heal you in similar ways... with the result that you become despondent when he doesn’t and you remain hampered with the consequences of the Fall.

So, what is Jesus teaching us today when his contention with deafness and tied-tongues takes center stage?

Certainly, the deafness and speech impediment of the man in our text were very physical realities; and such physical manifestation of this fallen world ought not be overlooked; God is not deaf to your cries for mercy and will not be silent to your needs.

But Jesus is also illustrating divine combat with a different type of deafness and uselessness of tongue: a *spiritual* one...one

that had recently been displayed by all who wanted bread, but turned a deaf ear to Christ's teaching of the living bread that comes from heaven.

Our society is emblematic of this deafness, even on a very "temporal" level. It has ears, but ears that do not hear. Or, some might say, ears that hear, but do not listen... and therefore have no tongue to speak! For example, remember when it was a novelty to walk through a store with music playing all around? Now it's so constantly there, we don't even appreciate it... and can't even recite the words! Or, what of our shorter and shorter attention spans? – so that 30-second TV commercials have given way to 10-second YouTube commercials, and history's 45-60 minute sermons have been trimmed by some all the way down to those 8-10 minute sermons so trendy today... and, if the sermon is so shortened, how will the tongue confess (in summary) what is already (basically) a summary! Or, what of our incapability to hear each other when dialoguing: as one comedian recently pointed out, when's the last time you saw someone reply to one of those raging, never-ending arguments on social media, "Good point, changed my mind"? They'll never *say* such things because there's first no ability to listen (or speak plainly).

Our inability to hear, then echo such things is symptomatic of the greater hearing impairment that affects the whole world;

and, only by God's grace in Christ Jesus, can such deafness and its resulting speech impediment be overcome.

Perhaps this is why Mark's gospel includes the scene's setup with three defining details as he does. First, that this occurred in the region of the Decapolis near Tyre and Sidon. Certainly, this area had not been known as a faithful area... an area not of Israel, but of the Gentiles... an area in which the mighty Word of God had not been found and thus, (as Paul hints), "how can they hear unless someone is preaching to them?" Jesus himself says, when condemning Chorazin and Bethsaida of the Jews, "If Tyre and Sidon had seen the mighty works done in you, they would have repented long ago." But, without the Gospel, and without ears to hear the gospel, who could expect tongues to confess the gospel?

Second defining detail: Jesus takes the man aside and unto himself. This subtle act of Christ is repeated when he heals the blind man at Bethsaida, taking him out of the village and unto himself. God grant us ears to hear the life of the Church in these words, for the Church is always and forever taken away from the world and unto Christ himself (Church, *ecclesia* – out of the world into assembly with Christ), where the Church is forever hearing and confessing Christ's doctrine.

And, even as we speak of the subtle hints that point to our life with Christ, do we not have ears to hear the deeper truth of the third detail that sets the stage: “They begged him to **lay his hand** on him”? Where else do we hear this imagery, except in the very Rite of Baptism, the very Rite of entrance into life with Christ and Jesus’ mercy toward the little children: “And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them” (Mark 10:16).

So then, the entire setup of this scene paints the picture that Jesus’ merciful work is to take the unbelieving deaf and mute out of the unbelieving world and unto himself, that He might bless us with the divine works secured by His nail-pierced hands.

And with that setup, the work begins... Jesus touches the man’s ears and, after spitting, touched his tongue. Why the spit? We see it elsewhere when Jesus spit into the dirt, created mud to put on the blind man’s eyes, and told that man to go wash in the pool. So, the spit has to have some significance.

One of the ancient Jewish writings – the Talmud (200AD) – records that spit may have in ancient times been considered a healing agent. Perhaps in both cases Jesus refers to that supposed healing agent, but then shows his superiority over it – for in neither miracle does the spit heal, but the Word of Jesus heals. To

the blind man, “Go wash in the pool”... and to the deaf man, “Ephphatha! Be opened.”

Ephaphtha – a word of Jesus that the Church is right to cherish, as this whole account speaks to Him giving us true hearing, true faith by the Holy Spirit. In fact, in the early church, the church father Ambrose included the word (and, thus, the images of today’s text) in the baptismal rite, as the pastor prepares the child for the renunciation of the evil spirit (“Depart, you unclean spirit”) by exhorting, “Open, therefore ears... which we have signified to you when, celebrating the mystery of opening, we say, Ephphatha, which is to open wide.” (CC 489)

What divine authority – that Jesus can speak to the deaf and they can hear him; he can speak to the evil spirits, and they will flee; and he can speak to the dead, and they awaken: “Little girl, get up. Lazarus, come forth. Christian, arise – for the day of vindication has come!”

So, Jesus speaks to the deaf, but he does not forget to also heal the mute tongue... and the healed goes forth in life both hearing and speaking. So it is with all of us who were born deaf to the Gospel, children of darkness. Christ has healed us in both hearing and speaking, in both being joyful recipients of it and joyful confessors of it. He baptized you into his life, that you might have ears to hear – and He established the expectation that the

life you have been born into is a life in which you will always hear and meditate upon the all things whatsoever Christ has instructed his ministers to teach you: “Going therefore make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them.” With the result that, he might regularly call out from this pulpit, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

And, in that hearing, and by that treasure of hearing, learning, meditating upon, inwardly digesting that proclaimed Word, you receive much heavenly wisdom to confess before men. For, Christ’s healing also gave you the tongue to confess the great joy that is now yours according to that life... a tongue to thank God, praise Him for His grace and favor, call upon Him in the day of trouble... a tongue that ought be bold to confess His name before men and always ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you.

And, if that notion of confessing before men sounds too daunting, recall that it’s not by the power of *your* word, but by the power of *Christ’s* Word that the tongue-tied impediments of men give way to the confession of Holy Truth. Consider the deaf man as an image of yourself: Ears given to hear, tongue given to speak – faith is worked, so is confession of that faith – and what is the end result for the formerly deaf and tongue-tied?: “He spoke plainly.”

Friends, it is good and salutary to “speak plainly” the faith in daily life. You need no winsome wording, no bait and switch, no sales pitch, no Jesus slogan with accompanying visual gimmick... and you certainly need not apologize or stumble over your words trying not to offend the broken world. You just speak plainly about the truth of God’s creation, Your redemption in Christ Jesus, and the sanctification that is yours by the work of the Holy Spirit in His Word and Sacrament gifts for the life and vindication of the Church. You may just speak plainly... that’s what it means to confess and that’s the plainspeak needed by this world, so tongue-tied in unbelief that it stumbles over what preferred pronouns to use!

Now, within the focus of our text, this might provoke the question, “Then why would Jesus tell them to remain silent? Why hinder them from speaking plainly about what they saw in his miracles?”

The answer comes in what is sometimes described as the “Messianic silence theory,” which points out that all of Jesus’ commands to “say nothing” or “remain silent” come in the first half of Mark’s gospel... *before* we get to chapter 8, verse 31, when Jesus gives his first prophetic narrative of the crucifixion. Before that statement, Jesus knows no one will have a ‘full/proper’ expectation of what the Christ is all about. They will see a bread-

king (recall last month's meditation on the feeding of the 5000), or they'll see in Jesus a magic-man, or a savior in the sense of improving my current life to become "my best life now."

This is not why Jesus has come, nor is it how (as our Introit refrain says) "The Lord is the strength of his people [and] the saving refuge of his anointed." Jesus knows the crowds will misunderstand His coming, for the sinful heart wants only to satisfy its own desires... which means, it only wants a savior who will satisfy its own desires.

But Jesus comes healing the blind, the mute, the deaf not to be their magic-man who promises their best life now. He does so to testify *in accord with the prophets' word!* What does our Old Testament reading say, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped... and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy." And again, elsewhere in Isaiah, "In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book..." Notice that? That the deaf shall hear – not just hear in general – but hear the words of a book, hear the words of the Sacred Book, the text which has etched into writing all the testimony of this Jesus who is the Christ. The spiritually deaf shall be given to hear this testimony and believe it – the testimony of the prophets and apostles, with Christ himself being the cornerstone through the record of the evangelists. Indeed, even – ironically – through the testimony of

those who, in their misinformed improper expectations of the Messiah, nevertheless still confess of Him with words those who have ears to hear can understand rightly: “He has done all things well.”

Indeed, Jesus has done all things well and has proven himself the Messiah, who comes to be the strength of His people, the saving refuge of His anointed. He who has given you ears to hear and the tongue of faith will not now be deaf or mute in response to your cries: “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.”

Most certainly, the Lord who has given you the ears to hear and tongue to speak so plainly, confess so simply, your utter dependence upon him... He will not respond with divine deafness and sovereign silence. Rather, He who in your baptism called out “Ephphatha” will again calm you with the plainspeaking of His Word and will heal you with His Sacrament – even this very hour and faithfully every Lord’s day... and He – for you and for your salvation – will continue to do all things well.

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

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