

Rev. Danny Mackey  
Trinity 12  
August 19, 2018  
Mark 7:31-37  
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

*“Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”*

Jesus has just traveled from the region of Tyre and Sidon. He had cast out a demon that held a young girl in its grip. Now, our Lord is by the Sea of Galilee. Again, Jesus comes face to face with a person in the devil’s grip: a man whose ears are imprisoned with deafness and whose tongue is bound by a speech impediment. When a person can’t hear, neither can he speak clearly or rightly. That’s the devil’s goal: disrupt and tear down the lives and the capacities of those created in the image of God, cause people trouble in both soul and body, and so turn our hearts away from the Lord.

The devil attacks us in our bodies. After all, didn’t Satan’s temptations result in sin entering the world? And with sin came sickness, pain, death. Even St. Paul calls his “thorn in the flesh” a “messenger of Satan.” Also, our Old Testament lesson connects deafness, blindness, and poverty to “the ruthless” and “the scoffer.” That’s the devil, right? Sounds like the devil to me.

That doesn’t mean the Lord can’t use even the devil for our good. Apostle Paul writes that God wouldn’t take away his physical troubles; instead, the Lord taught total reliance and trust in Him and His power in Christ. So, instead of turning our hearts away from the Lord, God uses the devil’s destructive schemes to draw our hearts even nearer to Himself. You’ve probably experienced this in your own life. Don’t you pray to God most eagerly and passionately in difficult times—when you have financial troubles, right before a surgery, or when you’ve got illness or great bodily pain? We pray because He alone can help helpless ones. We are weak, but He is strong—and we are made to be strong in the Lord. So, in the midst of Satan’s attacks, the Holy Spirit draws us to pray in faith, as the psalmist does, “Make haste, O God, to deliver me! Make haste to help me, O Lord!”

But we can’t pray this way unless the Lord first opens our ears and unlooses our tongue. Like the man in the Gospel, we are by nature deaf and mute towards God. We’re born that way, that is, we’re born in captivity to the devil, and our ears are closed and calloused towards God. We don’t naturally grasp His Words or understand what He says. We don’t

“speak His language.” That’s right. We can’t hear rightly, so we can’t speak rightly. It’s like talking to someone while you’re mowing the lawn and the volume of your earbuds is turned all the way up. (My neighbor likes to talk to me when I’m doing yardwork.) You can’t hear them, so you’ve got no idea how to respond. Sometimes you talk back way too loudly. That’s also how it is in our relationship with God. The world’s noise and our own fallen nature keeps us from hearing God speak, from listening to and grasping His Words. And our speech back to Him, if there is any, is too loud and doesn’t make any sense. Indeed, in a very real way, we’re just like the deaf-mute in today’s Gospel.

The people bring this man to Jesus, begging Jesus to put His hand on him. Immediately, Jesus takes the man aside, away from the crowds. And, with a bit of sign language, Jesus reaches out to him in a way that acknowledges him personally, where he is, in his language. Sticking His fingers in the man’s ears, spitting on the ground, grabbing ahold of man’s tongue, looking up to heaven, visibly sighing—all are part of the sign language. Jesus touches what is broken with the Creator’s touch. The Great Physician is at work. He is “hands on” and personal, not distant and removed.

The man was touched by the hand of God. God is a hands-on God. He stepped down from His glory in heaven, to step into our human flesh, to dwell among us and touch us through His own true humanity—fingers in the ears, spitting, and grabbing tongues. God deals with us human creatures as we are. God deals with us in the grubby, ordinary, earthy, everyday way of our human existence. The fingers in the man’s ears were the fingers of God. The hand grabbing the man’s tongue was God’s hand. Our Lord is “hands on” with His people.

But why fingers in the ears? Why spit and grab the tongue?

First, in the Scriptures, the “finger of God” is another term for the Holy Spirit. When Jesus puts His fingers into the man’s ears, He shows us that it’s only by the Spirit of Christ that our ears are opened to hear, to understand, and to believe His saving Gospel. 1 Corinthians 2 says, “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them.” “[But] we have received...the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.” Jesus opens our ears by His Spirit, the finger of God, that we may hear and comprehend and hold to His Words of life. It’s just like after Jesus’ resurrection when He appeared to His disciples. Luke

24 says, “And He opened their understanding”—opened is the same word that Jesus spoke to the deaf-mute—“that they might comprehend the Scriptures.”

Second, Jesus spitting and touching the man’s tongue is a picture for us of Holy Baptism. Our Lord touches us with water and unlooses our tongue rightly to sing of His glory. The Psalmist says, “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.” In Baptism, the Christ puts His name on us, that we may call upon His name in prayer. And the Lord places into our mouths His own words, that our once muted tongues may sound forth with the words of the faith. And so, we confess the creed, sing the church’s hymns, and proclaim His marvelous deeds. It is written, “[The Lord] has put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.” By first opening our ears to hear His Word rightly, the Lord also opens our mouth to sing and confess the faith rightly. First the ears, then the mouth. The speaking flows from the hearing. Christ puts His words into our ears, and they flow off our tongue back to Him in prayer and praise.

Jesus looks up to heaven. He sighs and says to the deaf mute, “Ephphatha,” which means “Be opened.” Immediately the man’s ears are opened, his tongue is loosed, and he speaks plainly. When Jesus says, “Be opened,” He speaks not just to the man’s ears and mouth but to his whole person. The words “Be opened” can also be understood in the original language as meaning “Be released!” Jesus releases this man from the devil’s grip. Jesus sets him free from that hellish prison. Jesus’ miracle is more than just evidence of his power over bodily ailments; it’s proof of His triumph over Satan. Jesus’ Words shatter the chains by which the evil one binds his victim.

Our Lord’s Words also shatter the chains which bind and enslave you. He says to you, too, “Ephphatha! Be released!” Hear the Words of the Bible and believe! Rise out of the darkness of sin to behold the smiling face of your heavenly Father! Kneel before the Lord and exult in the joyous meal! “Ephphatha! Be released! Be free!”

That freedom, however, doesn’t come without a price. As Jesus is about to speak, He sighs, He groans. Our Lord groans because He takes on Himself all the things that cause us to groan—the pain, the loneliness, the troubles, the illness, the deafness, muteness, and sin—whatever binds and enslaves us. You see, to release us from the captivity of Satan, the Lord put Himself under that very same captivity. He let Himself be placed into the hands of the powers of darkness. And like all sadistic tyrants would, the devil executed captive Jesus.

There, on the cross, Jesus made direct contact with our sin—like the fingers in the ears—and He groaned and breathed His last in our place. However, that death didn't mark Jesus' defeat. No, it marked His victory!

By the cross, Christ took away the sin that gives Satan his power. By His dying, Jesus overcame all that makes us sigh and groan in this fallen world and put it to death. And by His rising bodily from the grave, the Lord restored the bodies of all the faithful to life that is whole and immortal and imperishable—no more deafness and blindness and disease and death—no more sin and no more tears. That resurrection life will be revealed to us and to the whole creation when Christ returns on the Last Day. Isaiah thus prophesied, “In that day the deaf shall hear the words of the book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. For the ruthless shall come to nothing, the scoffer cease.”

It is most certainly true that the ruthless devil shall come to nothing and all his accusing scoffing will be silenced. The man before Jesus had his tongue released to speak plainly and truthfully about the immeasurable goodness of Christ the Savior. In fact, it's not just the deaf mute who now speaks but also all those with him. Although Jesus commands them not to tell anyone, they can't hold it in; they are driven to speak. The more Jesus commands them, the more widely they proclaim what He's done. Isn't that how it is with the Gospel? The freeing Gospel of Christ can't be restrained or bound but proceeds ever onward in the ears and on the lips of His Church, of you His people.

The Lord grant, then, that you who have had your ears opened and your tongues loosed by Christ may confess before the world with these people in the Gospel, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ + Jesus.