

The Hearing and Speaking Church

Kenneth Korby

Mark 7:31–37

A Time for Preaching, a Time for Hearing

My dearly beloved brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, any preacher who gets into the pulpit after singing a song like that is a kind of stammerer, and that's what the time has come this morning—the time for preaching. Here we are in the middle of the service, so now the preacher has told little man, “You stand up and say something.” We've heard what Isaiah said, what Paul said, what Jesus said, what the poets have said, what we have confessed. Now, little man, you say something.

That means it's also a time for hearing. We are to hear. Preacher and congregation are to listen.

The Deaf Man with a Stammering Tongue

But what if we are deaf? The story today is about a deaf man. It means he cannot hear what is said to him, and he has an impediment in his speech. He stutters, he stammers.

I finish that hymn, and I say, “Who can but stammer in the presence of that kind of poetic praise?” And yet, here is the time. Time to preach, preacher. You can't just say, “Repent, sit down, and go home.” Time to preach. That means it's time to hear.

And so, what if the preacher can't hear clearly? Then that means he won't know how to talk clearly. He won't stammer. He'll stutter.

And what if the tongue is tied? We're afraid, or embarrassed, or ashamed, and all our words come out crosswise and crooked and mumbled with each other. If that's the case, then we are in exact position of today's text.

The Excited Crowd and the Compassionate Pastor

A crowd is gathered around Jesus. They are full of thrills and excitement. One person after another gets healed. 5000 were fed in Mark four. 4000 were fed in Mark six. They're just having a whoop-de-do time. It is better than the state fair because nothing costs anything, and so they are excited.

And a number of times in these chapters, from four through seven, Jesus looks at the people, the crowd, and he has compassion on them, says Mark. They are like sheep without a shepherd. And what he does is exactly what any pastor who knows his business does. He pastors by teaching. Jesus started to teach them. For pastoring is not some clever trick that you know about making people feel good. Pastoring is about feeding, about teaching the word of God, and so Jesus opened his mouth and taught them.

They were full of excitement at Jesus' work. They wanted to see another one. Here was a deaf and dumb man, man who couldn't hear, and the man when he talked, he couldn't understand, who could hardly understand what he was saying. "Ha ha! Let's have another one." And so they are full of excitement as they bring him to Jesus, and they do what people do. They said to Jesus, "Please heal him."

But now the man is deaf and dumb. If Jesus is preaching and teaching, how is this man getting in on it? Unless perhaps you have some kind of lip reading or some kind of sign language, you will never know whether the person talking to you says "I love you" or "I hate you," or "I am delighted in you" or "I can't stand to be around you." How are you going to figure that out if you can't hear or lip read or have sign language? The man is deaf and dumb.

Only a Crowd Wishing for Wonders?

Well, how are we then going to respond to the word of God? Are we merely going to think about it like a crowd? A wish: "Oh, I wish Jesus were around today. I've got this bad leg, and I sure would like to go and have somebody preach who can do healing. I don't care what he says, just so he can fix my leg."

Well, maybe we wish that Jesus were around. If we could just find somebody, we knew somebody had a rag that his hands were laid on, that he could lay that rag on our hands, and our hands wouldn't have arthritis anymore. Wouldn't that be great?

But this is once upon a time. Today, it's not like that. Or if we find somebody like that, we'll run like a crowd. We'll have our pockets picked, our head filled with things, but we are deaf to the Word of God.

For Jesus does not mean now all ear doctors and bell-tone hearing aid people go out of business. Just run over to Jesus. Have Korby stick his fingers in your ears. You don't need to go to doctors, or if you need a speech therapist, don't worry about speech therapists. Just have somebody to lay his hands under the throat. Somebody who can do things like that.

Is that the point? No, that's not the point.

Willful Inattention to God

Our hard of hearing is not merely an eardrum, a hammer on an eardrum, or nerve in the inner bone. Our hard of hearing in this story points to something more than merely needing a doctor for hearing aids. It points to a heart that is willful in its inattention to God. It is death.

Whatever God says gets misunderstood. It's ignored. Doesn't fit me. Isn't talking to me. I can't understand it. I don't see how it works.

Somehow there's a willful inattention to it, and that is aggravated in our days because most people now conceive of their ears as decoration on the head on which you hang other decorations. For it is becoming harder and harder for people to—the fancy word—communicate, to listen, to talk, to talk without stammering, to talk straight, and to be able to hear straight.

The Noise and the Other Voices

Now, some of the hearing problem comes with the noise. It is dreadful. Do you want to drive your teenagers mad, or, for that matter, many adults? Just put them in a room. No TV, no radios, no telephones. Just quiet, physical quiet. We've got to have noise so much so that even physically, the hearing is being impaired at a greater and greater degree.

And sometimes we just don't want to listen. We've heard that same old thing from our spouse, or from our parents, or from our children, or from our pastor, or from the boss, or from the teacher. We just tune it out. We don't want to listen.

And what we will do is listen to other voices. We will think of ourselves somewhere else. We will fancy ourselves doing this. We will accuse ourselves. We will excuse ourselves all the time. We are deaf to what God is saying because we are preoccupied with the voices other than His.

God said, “Don’t eat it. The day you eat, you will die.” The liar said, “God is a liar. You won’t die.” So you have to listen to one word or another.

Where You Can’t Hear, You Can’t Talk

The deafness has to do with hearing the word of God, and where you can’t hear, you can’t talk. The stammering tongue—maybe it was a physical problem, a somatic problem, or it might have been some other kind of stuttering for that man. But if you do not hear clearly, you will not talk clearly.

So this miracle of the healing today is about a kind of hearing that is called faith, the healing of faith, and it is the kind of talking that is called praise, that tells the truth. Spouses and parents to each other and to their children, pastors to congregations, teachers to their children, friends with each other, friends and neighbors, it tells the truth because we learn to talk by what we hear. And if the church goes deaf and will not pay attention to the gospel because she’s got all kinds of voices to listen to, telling her do this, look that way, practice this, don’t do that, then she will be unable to talk clearly, for you can only learn to talk by what you hear.

Jesus Takes Him Aside

So Jesus’ activity with this man in the midst of the crowd is very instructive. Jesus took him aside privately. The crowd has its own noises. “Give us another one, Jesus! Look at that! Isn’t that magnificent? That lame leg is good. That cancerous head is healed. That hungry man is fed. Give us another one, Jesus.”

They have their own message, their slogan, their goal. The crowd is the untruth. The truth of God is the word of God, and that Word is One, Jesus in the flesh.

He takes this man aside privately, because finally the hearing is not like seeing. I can see the crowd, or even listen to its noise. The hearing is the penetration of that divine mercy into our hearts that opens our ears to hear His gracious love for us, and so this comes, although we’re

all together, it comes to us one by one into our ears, into our hearts and minds, so that they come out of our mouths.

The Finger of God

He puts his finger in the ear of the deaf man. This finger, for this is the word of God made flesh. I'll talk in a moment about his silence.

How silent it was after the announcement of His coming, conception, and birth. How silent! How silent on the cross, except when he preached about himself.

But here, this finger. He says, "Ah, if I by the finger of God cast out devils, then God's kingdom has come to you." He is pointing that the kingdom, that right-handed man of God, who rules over us when we pray, "Thy kingdom come," is this man in the flesh. He sticks it in his ears. He spits and he rubs some saliva on the man's tongue. This is no God who [unclear].

This is the God who became flesh, the God who came to save us, who in our flesh are sinners and marked with death, and who in our hearts and spirits cannot rid ourselves of that flesh. So Jesus is the Word of God spoken to us, the only Word of life and salvation. There is no other word. No matter how many people tell you how many sweet words there are, this is the word that gives life and salvation. He is the finger of God, and where that finger of God comes, the kingdom of God is at work.

The Silence and the Speech of the Word

So when it was announced that Jesus was going to be born, it was proclaimed and then silenced. For nine long months, silence of God. You could see Mary's stomach growing, and there was no doubt Joseph did like I did: patted her on the stomach, sang to the baby, prayed with the baby, blessed the baby. No doubt he did that too, but silence from that word. And when He is born, the eternal Word of God is a little baby that can't talk. Silence.

The angels preach him, the shepherds preach him, the wise men preach him, even the scholars in Jerusalem who wanted to help kill him knew about him. But there was silence, and then there was the speech of Jesus. He preached and proclaimed. The crowds were fascinated, not so much by what he said, but by what he did. But they were amazed at His authority, what He forgave, did, and raised the dead. And they were wild about his work.

The religious leaders were very uneasy with his speech. They knew from the beginning it was the death of their way of bartering with God. They knew that at the beginning everything was going to be rearranged in this kingdom of God. You don't have to try to pay off sin. The bartering is an insult to God, and so they watched the crowd. When the crowd was following Jesus, they were very worried, and then they became clever.

They learned how to manipulate the crowd, so that after Jesus preaching, after his great work of the suffering, rolling in the garden and hanging on the cross, then Jesus broke silence. Then He proclaimed what He was: "Father, forgive them. Today you are in paradise with me. Woman, take care of your son. Son, take care of your mother. Father, I commend Myself into Your hands."

There he preached, but when he was being accused, when our insults and our curses against him, the blasphemies that people spoke on him, he was like a lamb without a voice. He was quiet, like a deaf man. Now this man, Jesus, is the one who is the Word of God spoken to us in this man.

Jesus, the Cause of Our Hearing

Jesus heals more than we know. In the resurrection of the body, there will be nothing but sure healing, and already in the divine washing and forgiveness, we have that. He still takes His hands and He gives them His body, [unclear]. He still gives us himself to our mouths and words in our ears. He gives us preachers, brothers and sisters, pastors, congregation members, teachers, everybody, so that that speech of Jesus might be proclaimed.

But Jesus is not only the Word. What good would that Word do if you couldn't hear it? If I stood up here to talk to you in German, that wouldn't be of much help to you. You'd say, "Well, we can hear the sound, but we have no idea what's going on."

Jesus is not only the Word of God. He's the cause of our hearing. It isn't that we go somewhere, get our hearing tuned up, and then go listen to Jesus. It is that in His preaching, He is the cause of our hearing. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes by what is preached of Christ.

So the church that is the hearing church is the church of faith, the church where the word of the gospel has brought life and life, and that is where the healing is.

We're going to be waiting for a lot of healing when we can see the healing of our bodies, the aches of our souls, the scars on our mind and personality, where we will see the healing where there are no more gimp legs and bad ears and blind eyes. Right now, it comes by hearing. Even the time when he takes water and bread and wine and the hands of the pastor in absolution together with his mouth. Even there, what we see, we see by what we hear.

“Don't Tell Anyone”

So I ask you: Can you talk plainly if you do not hear clearly? “Don't tell anyone,” said Jesus to this man. “Don't tell anyone,” because they still thought most of it was about bread and having bad legs made good, bad eyes working well, bad ears hearing again. That's what they were beginning to think about.

So whenever they would preach, there would be a stammering. They would be stammering and stuttering about his message. It wouldn't be clear. So he said, “Don't tell anybody.”

And the more He said, “Don't tell them,” the more zealously they proclaimed it, because this was wild and new for them, and they saw something coming. What they saw coming was not yet clear to them, but Jesus knew what was coming, and so He says to them, “Wait, wait, wait.”

“He Does All Things Well”

Thus it is with you. You listen, so that you can be His holy church to speak plainly. You sing his praises like the crowd did. They not quite understanding about the crucifixion, the secret of the Messiah. They just thought this was wonderful. “He does everything well. He even makes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.” Well, that is fine. That is great.

You are much more blessed than they, for you do not see him merely walking around healing eyes and ears and legs. You have the whole story given to you, with the promise that the Spirit who works in that word will lead you into the truth. That is what you have, so you can praise him too. You can say, “He does all things well,” especially that He creates holy church.

We hear not only the sound and the voice, not only the waves beating on our ear drums, but we hear in that trust toward Him that is our cleansing and our healing and our hope and our joy. That is the church. Here we are, little, big, young, old, all here; we can [unclear] that with our mouth, what we have heard with our ears, and hold in our hearts.

Hence, today, at this point: “Now, man, you stand up and preach something to us.” As a preacher and the congregation are called to hear, listen.

What he says is what God gives to us in the crucified and given Jesus. What he wants is that our ears is, that they are open to faith, and that our mouth prays.

A Prayer from the Hymn “Lord, Open Now My Heart to Hear”

A good prayer then is what the poet said. Listen to it. I won’t sing it to you. That would be too much. You just do it.

Lord, open now my heart to hear, and through Your Word to me draw near; preserve that Word in purity, that I, Your child and heir, may be.

Your Word it is that heals my heart, that makes me whole in every part; Your Word of joy within me sings; true peace and blessedness it brings.

To God the Father, God the Son, to God the Spirit, Three in One, honor and praise forever be now and to all eternity.

You may say with me, Amen.

SOURCE

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