

Ephphatha and Spit

William Cwirla

Mark 7:31–37

Hearing and speaking. They are the input and output channels for words. Words go into ears; words come out of mouths. We learn by hearing and then speaking back what we have heard. We communicate by listening and speaking, hopefully in the right proportions.

Hearing and speaking also run together. The little child learns to speak by mimicking the sounds that he hears. First syllables, then words, then sentences, then whole paragraphs and on to a lifetime of grand conversation. When something is wrong with the ears, the mouth also will not work. The mouth relies on the ears. If you cannot hear, you will find it difficult to speak. People who are born deaf have a very difficult time learning to speak, if indeed they are able to speak at all. Many use sign language to hear with their eyes and speak with their hands.

Some people brought a deaf mute to Jesus. They were in the region of the Decapolis, the same region where Jesus had exorcised a legion of demons from a man and cast them into a herd of pigs who promptly jumped off a cliff into the sea. Word had gotten around. This Jesus had power. The One who had power of the demons would surely have the power to heal their friend. “Please lay your hand on him and make him better.”

Deafness isn’t a disease, really. It’s not life threatening. You don’t die of being deaf. But a world of silence is isolating. A life without words is a life without communication. Think of all the things you hear and say each day. We are all word processors from the moment we awaken and say our first prayers and good mornings. We hear words and speak them to others. Kind words. True words. Loving words. Flattering words. Hateful words. Lying words. Our lives are full of words heard and spoken. Words are the stuff of communication and communication is at the heart of communion. We have word fellowship with one another. A common language, a means of expressing ourselves to another. Look around at a crowded room sometime. Stand on the perimeter as an observer and watch the activity of conversation. It’s an amazing thing to see. People making meaningful sounds at each other. Sometimes it’s happy, sometimes it’s sad, sometimes they’re angry. But an amazing thing happens whenever a person connects with another person using words.

Or think about learning another language. Without a common language, we can't communicate, we can't make ourselves understood, we can't express our thoughts and feelings. Those of you who have learned and used other languages, do you remember the first time you spoke to another person in their language? The thrill of being understood, of cracking through that language barrier with even a few words. It's an amazing experience, and one that is completely lost to someone who is deaf. Deafness is worse than a disease.

Jesus has mercy on the man. He pulls him aside privately. He's not going to make a show out of this. And He does some things that seem strange to us. He sticks his fingers in the man's ears. He spits and touches the man's tongue. He lifts his eyes to heaven. He sighs. Sign language. Language this man could understand. More than that, it's the language of exorcism. This is what the exorcists did in casting out demons. And while deafness is not demon possession, Jesus treats it in precisely the same way.

He speaks to the man's ears: Ephphatha. A funny sounding Aramaic word. Be opened. That's all it takes from Jesus. A word. The man's ears were opened, his tongue released. He could hear; he could speak plainly.

And what does Jesus say? "Don't tell anyone." He just fixes a man's ear and tongue and He says, "Don't tell anyone." And of course, they go and tell everyone because no one listens to Jesus anyway, and how do you not tell everyone when your life that was full of silence is now filled with words? You want to use those words and tell everyone in your own words what Jesus has done for you.

We are that deaf mute in the Decapolis. As children of Adam we are conceived and born hard of hearing and slow of speech. Deaf to God's Word; mute to prayer and praise. We don't hear when God speaks to us. We don't naturally have words of prayer and praise on our lips. Our ears are blocked, our tongues are tied. What we hear is ourselves. The words we want to hear are our words, our wisdom, our self-justifications, all the ways we build ourselves up. That's what we want to hear. That's what we want others to hear as well. Our own spiritual noise. That's what we want to sing too. Not the new song of salvation but the old song of religion that doesn't magnify the Lord but magnifies "me" and justifies ourselves to God.

Jesus intrudes into the spiritual silence. Jesus sticks His fingers into our ears, not to tickle them or scratch our particular itch but to beat the rhythm of salvation onto our eardrums. He spits His baptismal spit of contempt against the devil, Sin and Death that seek to enslave and

destroy us. He looks to the Father, sighs His Spirit and speaks His ephphatha! be opened. And with that word He creates faithful ears that hear. "Faith comes by hearing." He takes hold of our tied-up tongues and releases a torrent of thanksgiving, confession, prayer and praise. "O Lord, open Thou my lips, and my mouth will declare Thy praise." If the Lord doesn't open our lips and loosen our tongues, there will be no prayer and praise coming out, but only the litany of curses and self-justifications and judgments that are a denial of God and an insult to our humanity.

People brought that deaf mute to Jesus. He hadn't heard about Jesus. He couldn't hear. He couldn't ask Jesus for anything. He couldn't speak. Friends brought him to Jesus and prayed for him. That's evangelism. That's mission. That's outreach. Here is one verse in the Gospel that you can be completely sure doesn't apply to you at all. What Jesus said to those people that day. "Don't tell anyone what happened." That's not for you. We hear the opposite. "Disciple the nations. Go and tell everyone."

They went and told everyone, in spite of what Jesus said. And people marveled and were astonished beyond measure. "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." And we might say, "You ain't seen nothing yet."

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy." Isaiah said that centuries before, laying down the prophetic path for Messiah. These were messianic signs. These were signs that the kingdom of God had come, that the age of messiah had dawned, that the forces of darkness and death had met the match and were defeated. Jesus didn't do these miraculous signs for headlines and celebrity. This wasn't like the hucksters on TV who broadcast their alleged "miracles" for millions to gawk at and send them money. Remember, Jesus did this privately, away from the crowds.

He didn't come to start a movement. He came to save the world. He didn't come to be a wonder-working celebrity. He came to die on a cross. He didn't come to fix every deaf ear and tied tongue. He came to bring life and salvation, to see humanity through death to resurrection, to glorify our humanity at God's right hand, to lay down His life as the one and only sacrifice that atones for our sins.

Now you see why Jesus told them not to tell anyone. Then, at that moment. He wasn't finished you. He hadn't breathed His last great sigh. "It is finished." That's where all these signs and

wonders and healings and demon castings and miracles point. To the cross and the darkness and the bleeding and sighing and dying. That's where the price of these miracles is paid out. Jesus goes along touching the untouchable, sticking fingers in ears, grabbing hold of tongues, reaching out to lepers, taking the dead by the hand to absorb into His flesh what has gone wrong with our flesh.

He becomes the disease for your healing. He becomes deaf in death for your hearing. He becomes mute for your praise. He becomes Sin for your righteousness. He goes to the darkness so that you might walk in Light.

He has done all things well. Oh yes, He has! He made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, the mute to talk. He justifies the sinner. He raises the dead. He baptizes, feeds, and forgives you. He opens your ears to His Word. He loosens your tongues to sing His new song of salvation.

He has done all things well. And you, baptized believer, are the living proof of it.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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