

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity: Mark 7:31–37

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Preached for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Can you imagine a total stranger coming up to you, sticking his fingers into your ears, spitting and touching your tongue? And your own friends brought you to him! It wasn't quite what the people had in mind when they brought their friend to Jesus. All they asked was for Jesus to place his hand on him and bless him! And here Jesus goes, sticking his fingers in the man's ears and spitting on his tongue.

That's what Jesus wants to do with us here this morning. He wants to stick His words into our ears. He wants to loosen our tongues to sing and to speak his praise. The One who does all things well wants to do all things well with us, too.

St. Mark doesn't tell us anything about the man whose ears and tongue didn't work. We don't even know his name. He was one of the many hearing impaired, living in silence, struggling daily to communicate with people whose ears did work. He'd never heard the sound of laughter or music or God's Word. He also spoke with great difficulty. Even the most casual of conversations was a struggle.

He came from the region of the Decapolis, the "ten cities" in Gentile territory. Ten no-name towns across from the sea of Galilee. It wasn't the sort of place you would have expected a proper Jewish Messiah to make an appearance, but then Jesus never fit anyone's profile of a proper Jewish Messiah. The Decapolis was the place where Jesus had cast a legion of demons out from a man and into a herd of pigs who subsequently jumped off a cliff into the sea. The people of the region weren't too fond of that sort of thing going on in their community and so they asked Jesus and his disciples to leave. But word had spread about Jesus' power over demons and diseases, and so the next time he showed up in the area, some people were actually sought him out.

That's how Jesus and this man whose ears and tongue didn't work got together. Some friends believed enough about Jesus to bring their friend. In our day we call that "evangelism" and assign it to committees and task forces. We talk a lot about it, and about how we should be

doing more of it. But what it boils down to in the end is bringing people you know to Jesus to have Him bless them. It really isn't any more complicated than that.

"Won't you please lay your hand on our friend? His ears and tongue don't work. We heard what you did with the demons, and so we figured you might be able to help him."

Jesus takes the man aside, away from the crowds. He doesn't want to make a show. This isn't for the TV and the tabloids. What Jesus does is so different from the so-called celebrity "faith healers" of our day. Jesus never sought celebrity. And he doesn't use the misfortune of others to draw attention to himself. He is completely there for that man who couldn't hear or speak. He has Jesus' undivided attention.

Jesus uses a bit of sign language. He reaches out to him in a way that acknowledges him personally. Jesus reaches out to the man where he was and deals with him in his language.

Jesus takes his fingers and sticks them in the man's ears. Then he spits on his fingers and touches the man's tongue. He touches what is broken with the Creator's touch. The Good Physician is at work. He is "hands on," not distant and removed. Touch is vitally important to healing. We don't do enough of it in our culture anymore. The stethoscope was the first piece of equipment that got between doctor and patient. Now the doctor could listen to your heart and your breathing without touching you. And we've become further and further removed from human touch. We get x-rayed and our body fluids get extracted and sent to labs and we get crammed into MRI tubes. But we are touched by few.

I was impressed with the news footage of Mother Theresa at work among the poor and the dying of India. What impressed me was how she touched everyone she met. There was always a hand on the head or the shoulder, even as she fed or bathed someone. She touched the untouchables with her hands, the poor and filthy and diseased. Her hands brought comfort and hope and healing in the name of Jesus.

When Jesus touched someone, they were touched by the hands of God. God is a hands-on God, who stepped down from His glory in heaven, to step into our human flesh, to dwell among us and touch us through His own humanity. Fingers in the ears, spitting and grabbing tongues. He is the God who deals with us as the human creatures that we are. None of this out of body "spiritual" nonsense we hear about today. God deals with us in the grubby, ordinary, earthy, everyday way of our human existence. When Jesus stuck his fingers into that

man's ears, they were the fingers of God. When Jesus touched the man's tongue, it was God touching his tongue.

Jesus looked upward to heaven. "That's where your help comes from," he was saying to the man. "Your help comes from God, and I have come to bring God to you." He is our go-between, the mediator between God and man. He prays for us. He intercedes for us. He touches us with God's touch. Jesus sighs. He groans. He knows how deep the brokenness is, and what price he will have to pay to fix it. He knows the cost of this healing: a cross and His death. Jesus knows our human suffering and sorrow. He knows our weakness. When He groans on our behalf, they are the same groanings with which the Holy Spirit prays for us in our weakness.

Finally, Jesus speaks a word. St. Mark gives us the Aramaic original: Ephphatha! Be opened. Be released. Jesus wasn't simply speaking to his ears, he was speaking the whole man. "Be released from your bondage. Be free." Jesus was releasing him from everything that held him bound and captive. "Be released." Jesus came to proclaim release to the captives. To those who are bound in sin and death, He came to speak a liberating Word.

The Word of Jesus is living and active, Spirit and life. His words fall on deaf ears and cause them to hear. His words fall on mute tongues and cause them to speak. At the sound of Jesus' word, Ephphatha! the man's ears could hear and his tongue was freed and he spoke plainly and clearly. Mark doesn't tell us what he said. But the attention is always on Jesus, not on the miracles or those who receive them. All we know is that he spoke plainly and coherently. His ears were opened. His tongue was loosed.

And then Jesus ordered everyone not to speak, which is a bit ironic, since he just loosened a man's tongue. The man can now speak clearly, yet Jesus puts a gag order on him and the others. Jesus didn't want to be known as a wonder worker. If all that people saw in Jesus was a cure for their temporal problems, an ear and tongue specialist, they missed the point. If all we see in Jesus is quick therapy, we have missed the point. The apostle Paul said that if our hope in Christ is only for this life, if all we look to Jesus for is a solution to our problems, then we are of all people most to be pitied.

There was more to Jesus than miracles. The miracles were signs that God had come to us to touch us. Isaiah had spoken of it centuries before. "Your God will come," he prophesied. "He will come with vengeance, with divine retribution, He will come to save you." The eyes of the

blind will be opened. The ears of the deaf will be unstopped. The lame will leap like the agile deer. Mute tongues will shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the dry wilderness, streams of water in the desert. Burning sand will break out in bubbling springs.

God came in Jesus Christ. He came to save us by absorbing into himself all the sin and evil and brokenness, all that had gone wrong with us, all that had come into the creation because of our Fall. He came to take up our sicknesses and diseases into his own body, to battle the demons that darken our lives, to take up the devastation that crushes us. He came to free us from everything that binds us, that imprisons us, that keeps us from being God's free children. He came to unchain us from sin, from death, from the devil. He came to bring in a new creation with His own dying and rising, a newcreation in which blind eyes see, and mute tongues speak, and the lame leap, and water flows in dry, desert places.

That's why Jesus didn't want anyone to say anything about what happened. It was too small, too soon. There was much more of Jesus to come. His death on the cross. His open, empty tomb. His ascension to glory. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Then His disciples would speak, openly and plainly.

But yet the people of the Decapolis told everyone about what happened. The more Jesus tried to quiet them, the more they spoke. People were overwhelmed at the power of Jesus' words. With a simple word Jesus did what no man could do, and yet he did it in such a human way. Through His humanity came the power of God to save, to set free, to release from bondage. And people just had to talk about it. "He has done all things well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

We have even more to say about Jesus than they did. Greater things even than making ears and tongues work again. Jesus has died for us, risen from the dead for us, reigns over all things for us. He lords His death and resurrection over our sin and death. That's something to talk about, isn't it?

He has said Ephphatha to us in our Baptisms. He's opened our ears to hear His Word. He's anointed our tongues to sing His praises and to pray to Him and to proclaim Him. He's done it again today for another of His little ones in Holy Baptism. And He continues to put His forgiveness into our ears, His body and blood on our tongues, His Word on our minds and hearts, in the same earthy incarnate way of fingers in ears and spit on tongues.

Today we are remembering the importance Christian education. In view of today's Gospel we might look at Christian education as a continuation of Jesus' work of unstopping ears and loosening tongues. We are born deaf to God's Word. We are born mute to prayer, praise and thanksgiving. But out of God's grace someone brought us to Jesus, as the people brought that deaf and mute man from the Decapolis to Jesus. Someone brought us to Baptism. Someone taught us God's Word. Someone stuck the Gospel of Jesus in our ears. A parent, a pastor, a friend, a teacher.

Teaching can be frustrating work. You're never can be quite certain what has sunk in and what has bounced off into outer space. Sometimes you wonder whether they can hear at all, or whether their tongues work properly. When you see that at work in your children and your students, remember your own deafness to God, how slow you are to hear it. Recall the muteness of your tongue, how reluctant you are to speak it. Let Jesus open your ears and free your tongue with His forgiveness. Then you are in a position to teach.

Every once and a while you get a little reminder of what God has been up to with His word. When a little child tells you, "Jesus loves me, and He died for me." Or, as one parent reported, your child goes down the aisle of the grocery store singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" at the top of his lungs or reciting the Apostles' creed for everyone to hear while you're standing in the checkout line. The Word of God has a way of breaking through and getting in.

I'm a firm believer in having the little ones in church, in the Liturgy. Even the littlest ones. Some people say that they are the future of the church. Jesus says they are the picture of what the church ought to look like. I know takes a great deal of patience, but it's well worth the effort, even if it means a few squirmy Sundays. Most of us learned to pray "Our Father who are in heaven..." long before we knew what the words meant. We grew into it. St. Paul reminded Timothy of how he had been acquainted with the Scriptures since the time of his infancy, before he could read. Most things we give our children, they will grow out of all too quickly. But the Liturgy of God's Word and the Lord's Supper they will grow into, a little bit every week, if only we give them the chance. They learn by watching us. They learn by participating along with us. They are counting on us. They can't do it on their own. What a awful thing it is when open ears are denied the voice of their Shepherd, or when loosed tongues have no opportunity to pray, praise, and give thanks.

Parents and teachers, you've been given the holy calling to train the ears and tongues of God's little ones. You are teaching them to use their ears to listen to God. You are teaching them to

use their tongues to praise and pray. Such teaching is holy work. We thank God for you parents and teachers, and we pledge to you our prayers and our support. Remember, it is Jesus who is at work in and through you. And He does everything well.

He's the One who opens ears. He loosens tongues. He forgives sinners. He raises the dead. He gives eternal life. He's does everything well. Trust Him to do everything well with you.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Mark 7:31-37 (16 Pentecost B)", posted 1997-09-21 (<https://htlcms.org/1997/09/mark-731-37-16-pentecost-b/>).