

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity  
St. Mark 7:31-37

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

What Jesus does in today's text is very indicative of St. Mark's Gospel. There's no soft and sweet beginning to his Gospel, no angel choirs, no lineage, none of those "tedious" details. In fact, there is no softness at all throughout the Gospel. No 12-year old Jesus causing Mary to marvel, in fact, no sweet Mary at all. No, for Mark, his point is to get to the meat of the story of Christ, so the first thing he does is introduce John the Baptist. Then, Jesus arrives on the scene and is baptized. Immediately, Mark's favorite word, Jesus makes His way into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

The same kind of thing is happening in today's pericope. Jesus is making His way to the Sea of Galilee when a deaf man with a speech impediment is brought to Him. Jesus pulls him aside, puts His fingers in the man's ears, spits, touches the man's tongue, and shouts, "Ephphatha," "Be opened!" Immediately (see, I told you Mark likes this word), the man could hear and speak.

Ephphatha is an interesting word. A friend of mine said that Ephphatha equals Pentecost. It really does. There, on that day in Jerusalem, mouths and ears were opened so that the Gospel could be proclaimed in the languages of the people gathered in the city for the feast, and they could all hear the message of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins.

Therefore, the disabled man in today's Gospel serves as a picture for the deaf men and women sitting here today and the world over. His is, therefore, not a disability for which he should be pitied, but he is a picture of the human condition. So, while the man can't hear everything going on around him, while he can't speak or sing to anyone to save his life, the problem in Mark's Gospel is that he can't hear the message which was proclaimed on that first Pentecost Day, which has been repeated through the millennia in churches throughout the world and spoken from pulpits and soapboxes since: that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Word-made-flesh, sent by God at just the right moment in time to die for the sins of the world, the propitiation, who has won remission of sins and salvation for all mankind even as He rose from the dead.

But the human condition is that same deafness and muteness of the man in the text. You know it all too well. Hearing about Jesus is fine, but hearing about Jesus' death and resurrection for you always finds a sore spot. That sore spot is your own mortality for the sake of your first parent, Adam. You share in his sin and bear the marks in your own flesh. And speaking about Jesus? Well, that's no problem so long as you are preaching to the choir or can do so anonymously, but in one-on-one situations or among the heathen, you would rather remain silent.

This deafness and muteness is symptomatic of something that might happen in times such as these, when elections roll around. You might think, hear, and say it expressed like this: "You can't be a Christian and support such-and-such candidate." And in times like these as well, where nations are gathered together in the name of sport and sportsmanship; Americans are winning gold medals left and right, and for one evening, a gymnast is ridiculed for not putting her hand over her heart during the national anthem at the medal ceremony. To what or whom are these people pledging allegiance? Is the mark of a Christian which political character he or she supports? And far be it from you to proclaim in the public square an allegiance to Jesus over and above any political figure or flag!

And it's the reason why congregations fail. You can find no end to books and seminars intended to help congregations grow or to find their center. They'll suggest program after program and capital campaign after capital campaign, and not one of these things will ever succeed, or not for long. The reason congregations fail and people leave is because they cannot hear, and if they cannot hear, then they cannot speak. They refuse to hear the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And since they refuse to hear it, they refuse to speak it. Their allegiance is some program—a choir, a children's program, a young adult program—and not to Jesus' death and resurrection for them. It sounds absurd, but for them, what it amounts to is that Jesus Christ's death and resurrection is not authentic Christianity!

Is that how it is with you? Heaven knows I've encountered my fair share of visitors who have said, among a few other things, that they like this place, but they won't come back because there's nothing for

them here. It's an outright rejection of the presence of Jesus Christ FOR THEM. There's nothing here for them, they say, because they are blind and deaf to the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for them and the very body and blood of Jesus upon the altar! Perhaps that's why some absent members are constantly absent. Maybe there are days that you feel the same way, too.

All of this is to put something in the place of Jesus and His death and resurrection for you. The mark of a Christian is to "confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead." (Romans 10:9); and that, dear hearers, above all—above your political candidate, your love for country, and your pet program.

There's another symptom of this deafness and muteness. You lifers know it all too well—that is, you who have been coming to this place, or one very much like it, for all of your life. You arrive at the same time every Sunday morning, sit in the same places, say the same things week-in-and-week-out. You've been singing the same hymns out of the same, old hymnal, and truth be told, you have your favorites that you can sing now without the hymnal in your hands. You know the liturgy by heart. It's all old hat, so old that it is ritual—you say and sing the words, but do you hear what they proclaim; do they hold any meaning to you?

They absolutely should, for they are the very Gospel that Mark wants your ears opened to hear and your mouth open to proclaim. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, sent in the flesh, to be your propitiation; He went to the cross for you, carrying the sin of your flesh and the sins you've committed there, died in your place, and destroyed your sin. It is removed far from you; as far as east is from the west. Every part of the liturgy and almost every hymn, even in that old hymnal speak and sing this message into your ears. It's all right there for you to speak and hear!

To get you to hear this, Jesus sticks His fingers into your ears. It happened right there at the font, or one similar to it. Your ears were opened and you heard the Word of God and it worked in you faith, the very faith that Jesus procured for you by His dying and rising again to life. You were washed and given newness of life.

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
(Romans 6:3-11)

To get you to speak this, Jesus touches your tongue. It happens right here at the altar, or one very much like it. For at this altar, the Word of God is spoken over some bread and wine, the very words of Jesus from the night on which He was betrayed, and they are for you the very body and blood of Jesus Christ. These touch your tongue with His very life and forgiveness of sins—flesh to flesh—and you are loosed to hear and speak Christ crucified to a world at once hostile to the message (and therefore, toward you) and at the same time very much in need of the very same message, though they are still deaf and mute to it.

Jesus Christ is the very Son of God, the Word-made-flesh, come to His creation to redeem it—buy it back from the sin and death into which it has fallen since Adam, and in which it has participated since that fateful day. He has accomplished this once for all men when He died the death due all on the cross, was buried, and rose again on the third day. St. Mark's entire Gospel is a testament to this. Every encounter with Jesus is an encounter with this message. Ephphatha—be opened! You encounter Him here like the people in St. Mark's Gospel, and for it, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.