

EPHPHATHA! BE OPENED!
Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, 2021
Mark 7:31-37

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the second half our Gospel reading read before, Mark 7:31-37, where Jesus heals the man who was deaf and could not speak plainly: **Jesus again left the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee and through the region of the Decapolis.** ³² **Some people brought to Him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk and begged Jesus to lay His hand on him.** ³³ **Jesus took him away from the crowd to be alone with him and put His fingers into the man's ears. Then He spat and touched the man's tongue.** ³⁴ **He looked up to heaven, groaned and said to him, "Ephphatha!" which means, "Be opened!"** ³⁵ **Immediately the man's ears were opened, the bond of his tongue was untied, and he began to speak plainly.** ³⁶ **Jesus ordered the people not to tell anyone. However, the more He forbade them the more widely they kept telling about it.** ³⁷ **They were extremely amazed. They said, "He has been doing everything well. He even makes deaf people hear and dumb people speak."**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Some people have a hard time believing that some of the miraculous things mentioned in the Bible *really happened*. Indeed, the Bible is full of miraculous events. Think of such things as creation, the flood, the parting of the waters, the manna from heaven, the sun standing still, Jonah being swallowed by a big fish, the raising of the dead, Christ's death and resurrection, and on it goes. We know that all these events truly happened because God has spoken them in His Word, and by faith, we believe those words to be entirely true, *even if they make no sense to us*.

The first thing we should say about the miracle mentioned in our text, namely that of **a man who was deaf and could hardly talk**, begging Jesus to lay His hand on him, is that that too really happened. Jesus really did open the deaf man's ears and loose his tongue. This was a real physical healing. Even with our medical advances today, no one is healed from their deafness and speaking difficulty the way Jesus healed this man. Imagine going to a doctor who would immediately grant you perfect healing and speaking by sticking his fingers in your ears and spitting and touching your tongue!

From reading our text, we must recognise that God cares about our bodies as well as our souls. The fact that our bodies are messed up and don't work right is a sign and a symptom of our deeper spiritual problem, that is, that we have become estranged from God and have come under the curse of futility and death, and our bodies are breaking down as a result. But God cares about us in our misery. He has mercy upon us. This is exactly why Jesus, the Son of God, has come into this world – to heal our souls and our bodies, to redeem us from sin and all its terrible consequences.

And so Jesus healing this **man who was deaf and could hardly talk**, this man's infirmities - is in itself a sign. It is a signal as to who this man Jesus is and what He has come to do. It is telling us - and it was telling those in Jesus' time, that Jesus has come to fulfil the great prophecies of the Messiah and the messianic age of blessing He would be bringing in. We heard one of those messianic prophecies earlier this morning in our First Reading. It's the reading from Isaiah 35, the promise of the signs that would accompany the arrival of the Messiah: "*Then the eyes of blind people will be opened, and the ears of deaf people will be opened. Then the lame man will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb man will shout for joy*" (v. 5-6).

When the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked, "*Are You the One who is coming or are we to expect someone else*" (Luke 7:19), Jesus first performed miracles and then told the messengers, "*Go and report to John what you have seen and heard! Blind people see, lame people are walking, lepers are made clean, deaf people hear, the dead are raised, and poor people are having the good news told them. Blessed is anyone who is not offended because of Me!*" (verses 22-23). That's precisely what Jesus was doing in our text. While the first coming of the Messiah was not to be a time when all handicaps and diseases would disappear, nevertheless, the ministry of the Messiah was marked by such miracles. The message is clear: This man is the Messiah. He's come to do the work of healing our

bodies and restoring creation, and ushering in the age of blessing. Those miracles verified His identity and the Scriptures that announced His coming.

And so it is. These miracles of restoration and healing are an advance down payment, a sneak preview, a guarantee of the restoration in full that Messiah Jesus will do when He comes again at the Last Day. For now, we have these examples recorded in Scripture to tell us what is coming for all of us and to give us hope and encouragement to carry on until that day.

God has mercy on us in our misery. Jesus is the proof. Sometimes we think that God has forgotten about us, that He does not care about our hurts and sorrows. But then we look at what Jesus is doing in the gospels in restoring creation and forgiving sins and healing broken bodies, and we are reminded that *God really does care*. Yes, even back then, not everybody in the world got healed, and those that did would end up dying from something else later. But the fact that we have these examples of Jesus healing the sick tells us that this is what is in store for us, too, and on an even grander scale because Jesus deals with the problem beneath the problem. It wasn't just a matter of fixing a deaf man's ears and untying his tongue. There is a deeper spiritual problem that underlies all our physical ailments and why we all end up dying, and not necessarily in a direct one-to-one correspondence: This man did this particular sin, and therefore he was struck with this specific ailment. No. But more broadly, more basically, we all are born sinners, and therefore things won't work right. The particulars can vary from person to person, but the underlying problem is the same. We all have sinned. We have not listened to God's Word, our heart has not trusted Him, and we have rebelled against His will. It's that sinful nature we all have, which produced all kinds of actual sins. And for that to get fixed, God has to do the job. We can't fix it on our own.

That's why Jesus has come, to fix the problem for us. Jesus has cared for us so much that He even went to the cross to get the job done. The Son of God dying for sinners - that's the only solution. **"He has been doing everything well,"** the people said when Jesus healed the man who was deaf and could not speak plainly. Yes, and even more so! Jesus has done all things well, very well, exceedingly well. And the supreme thing He has done well is to rescue and save a whole world of dying sinners. He has done this for every one of us! Jesus is our Saviour! He has died for us! He has risen for us! He forgives all our sins. He will heal us of all our diseases. He will raise up our dead, lifeless bodies, even as He Himself rose from the dead. We have this hope even now, and that is what the healing of the man who was deaf and could not speak plainly is telling us today.

"Jesus... looked up to heaven, groaned and said to him, "Ephphatha!" which means, "Be opened!" Jesus says this to us so that our ears would be opened, opened to hear God's Word. **"Ephphatha!" which means, "Be opened!"** Jesus says this so that our tongues would be untied to glorify God and sing His praise.

According to our sinful nature, we don't do those things. Our ears were closed to hearing God's voice. We would tune God out. By nature, our tongues do not give God the glory He deserves. But Jesus has come, and He speaks His mighty **"Ephphatha"** to us. His gospel Word opens our ears to hear and our tongues to sing.

In the ancient church, when a person was baptised, the pastor first would take his fingers and touch the person's ears. The pastor would say that very word, **"Ephphatha!" which means, "Be opened!"** The application was clear: We need God's work in Holy Baptism; we need the Holy Spirit to open our ears spiritually in order to be able to hear God's Word in the way we ought. We need a new nature. This is what God has given us in baptism. Our ears have been opened. When the Spirit calls us to repentance, we can hear what He's saying. When the Spirit assures us of God's forgiveness for Christ's sake, we hear that Good News and sing for joy. Our ears have been opened, and our tongues untied.

Opened ears, untied tongues. Martin Luther makes this same point in a sermon he preached on this text in 1533. Let me read a portion of it to you: *"Christ shows us that He opens ears and unbinds tongues. He seeks to perform this work daily in His church... It is a physical fact that God gives sound ears and tongues also to the heathen; but only for Christians is this spiritual fact true, that He opens ears and looses tongues. For we Christians must hear His Word with our ears and confess with our lips.*

"This is sure, that we have our salvation alone through the Word of God. What would we otherwise know about God, about our Lord Christ, His sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit? To this day the greatest miracle and mightiest work is giving a person ears that gladly hear God's Word and a tongue that honours God and does not blaspheme.

“Many people are a thousand times worse off than this poor deaf and dumb man. They have ears that are really stopped up. They hear God’s Word and yet really do not hear it, nor do they want to. But those who hear God’s Word gladly and to whom Christ says, as to the deaf man, ‘Ephphatha (Be opened),’ are helped... God has shown us no other way by which we can come into heaven than through His precious Word, the Holy Gospel. Whoever gladly and diligently hears and receives it and who loves and delights in it will be helped.

“God also stirs our tongues and causes us to speak... Through faith in Christ we come to have the forgiveness of sins; confession should also follow. We must not be mute, but speak what we believe in our hearts.”

And then Luther goes on to say: *“Our tongues will not be loosed, our ears opened, faith in our hearts begun, without the outward, oral preaching of the Word and external Sacraments. For parish pastors and preachers are the fingers of our Lord God, the servants and spittle through which He looses our tongues and opens our ears. When you hear them, God says to your heart, as to this deaf man, ‘Ephphatha!’ so that your ears are opened, your tongue unsticks, and you become a hearing, speaking person, no longer deaf and mute.”*

“Ephphatha!” which means, “Be opened!” Today our ears have been opened to hear the Good News that Jesus has been preaching to us by means of the healing of the man in our text. That message is that healing, total healing of both body and soul, is the gift that Christ has for us. He forgives us all our sins by His blood on the cross. He will raise up our bodies whole and fully restored, everything working right, in the resurrection at the last day. This is our faith, this is our hope, and this is what causes our tongues to sing for joy.

“Ephphatha!” which means, “Be opened!” If anyone has ears to hear¹ - and that would be us, baptised children of God - if anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. Amen.

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

PRAYER FOR THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord our God, we rejoice to stand in Your presence and to come before You in prayer, praise, and thanks through Your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. We thank You for showing us Your power and glory in this vast universe, and for enabling us to see Your majesty and might in the creation around us. We praise You for filling the earth with life and goodness, and for renewing it continually according to Your laws. Help us to harvest the fruit of honest effort, to find joy in the coming of each new day, and to rest in the peace of each night.

Above all else, we thank You for the gift of Your only Son Jesus Christ, and for revealing Yourself and Your saving love to us through Him. We praise You for His holy life of true manhood, for His innocent sufferings and death on our behalf, and for His glorious resurrection to eternal life, so that, through Him, we have the forgiveness of our sins, the power to conquer all evil, and the sure gift of eternal life. Bring us finally to the everlasting kingdom that You have promised us through Your Son.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of Your Word to be the lamp to light our path through life. Give us Your Spirit that we may listen to Your Word with eager understanding. Enrich our lives with the endurance and the encouragement that the Scriptures give, and fill us with hope, now and for ever. Lead us by the Spirit, so that we may not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Teach us to ignore the desires of our sinful natures. Give us confidence that there is wisdom in Your commandments, and grant that we may take delight in them. Fill our lives with the Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, peace, humility, patience, goodness, and faithfulness.

We pray for Your Church. Rule and direct it to accomplish Your purposes and plans. Defend it against all error and doubt, and keep it in the truth. Make it alive by Your grace, that it may seek to praise You in every good work.

Uphold all leaders in our land. Help them to know and follow Your will, so that they may maintain law and order with firmness and love, and so that we may live in peace and quietness, and serve You without hindrance.

Bless our homes. Guide all parents that Your Word and will may have pride of place in their lives. Help the young to live in the light of Your Word and to know the happiness of a life of faith and purity.

We pray for all who are facing hardship, sickness, suffering, and danger. Fill their lives with Your grace, and hold before them the perfect peace of Christ.

¹ Matthew 11:15; Mark 4:23

These prayers, and all our unspoken desires, and anything else we should have asked of Your mercy, give us for the sake of Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 35:4-7a

⁴ Say to those whose hearts are dismayed: “Be strong, do not be afraid! Look! Your God will come with vengeance, with the retribution of God. He Himself will come and save you!”

⁵ Then the eyes of blind people will be opened, and the ears of deaf people will be opened. ⁶ Then the lame man will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb man will shout for joy. For water will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. ⁷ Then the parched ground will become a pool, and the thirsty ground will become springs of water.

James 2:1-10, 14-18

¹ My fellow-Christians, as you hold the faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord of glory, do not show favouritism!

² For, if a man with a gold ring on his finger and wearing fine clothes comes into your assembly for worship, and a poor man in dirty clothes also comes in,

³ and, if you give special attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “You take this good seat here!” and you tell the poor man, “You stand there!” or “Sit at my footstool!”

⁴ have you not shown favouritism among yourselves and become judges with evil motives? ⁵ Listen, my dear fellow-Christians! Has God not chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him? ⁶ However, you have dishonoured the poor man. Do not rich people oppress you and are not they the ones who drag you into the courts? ⁷ Are not they the ones who say wicked things about the noble name after which you have been called? ⁸ If you really fulfil the Royal Law, according to the Scripture passage: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself!” you are doing well. ⁹ However, if you show favouritism, you are committing a sin, and the Law convicts you as transgressors.

¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole Law and yet stumbles in one point has become guilty of them all...

¹⁴ What good does it do, my fellow-Christians, if someone says that he has faith but if he does not have works? That faith cannot save him, can it? ¹⁵ If a

Christian man or woman is without clothes and daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you tells them, “Go in peace! Keep warm and well fed!” but you do not give them what the body needs, what good does it do? ¹⁷ So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ¹⁸ However, someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works. Show me your faith without works, and I shall show you my faith by my works!”

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went away to the vicinity of Tyre. He went into a house and did not want anyone to know it but could not avoid being noticed. ²⁵ Indeed, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about Him, came and fell at His feet. ²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She kept asking Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He answered her, “First let the children eat all they want! For it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the pet-dogs.”

²⁸ She answered Him, “Lord, even the pet-dogs under the table eat some of the children’s crumbs.”

²⁹ Jesus told her, “Because you have said this, go! The demon has gone out of your daughter.”

³⁰ When the woman went home, she found her little child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

³¹ Jesus again left the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee and through the region of the Decapolis. ³² Some people brought to Him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk and begged Jesus to lay His hand on him. ³³ Jesus took him away from the crowd to be alone with him and put His fingers into the man’s ears. Then He spat and touched the man’s tongue. ³⁴ He looked up to heaven, groaned and said to him, “Ephphatha!” which means, “Be opened!”

³⁵ Immediately the man’s ears were opened, the bond of his tongue was untied, and he began to speak plainly. ³⁶ Jesus ordered the people not to tell anyone. However, the more He forbade them the more widely they kept telling about it. ³⁷ They were extremely amazed. They said, “He has been doing everything well. He even makes deaf people hear and dumb people speak.”