

Ephphatha: Be Opened
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn
September 20, 2009

Scripture: Mark 7:31-37

One of the great things about having four gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry is the breadth and depth of how the story is told. Combined, the gospels tell us so much about our God incarnate and what he did on earth.

Consider, for example, just the verbs that are used to describe Jesus' actions.

Jesus prayed and preached. He fed and healed. He spoke and taught. Jesus commissioned and sent. He stilled storms and plucked grain. He dined and he fasted. You see how I could go on.

The gospels tell us that Christ did many of these things repeatedly, as if to say these actions were what was most important to Christ and why God came into the world. A study of the verbs of Jesus would make a marvelous Bible study, one that could and should shape our own actions in this world.

But in only one place in all of the gospels does Jesus sigh. In the seventh chapter, Mark writes: "Then looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed and said "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."

Scripture doesn't tell us what was behind that sigh. Another translation for the Greek is that Jesus groaned. This story comes amid a very busy missionary trip into gentile territory, so perhaps Jesus was just tired. Or, perhaps, Jesus was exasperated, as he is portrayed at times in Mark when he loses patience with humanity's inability to hear and speak as we should.

If we are honest, we confess that we routinely give Jesus plenty of reasons to groan or sigh at our behavior. But lately, we've been particularly busy, especially here in America, especially in the way we've been talking to each other or, perhaps I should say, shouting at each other.

Congressman Joe Wilson breaking decades of protocol by shouting down the president. Serena Williams cussing out a ball boy. Kanye West storming the stage so he could make sure we all heard his voice above others.

Thankfully, as local faith reporter Tim Funk wrote in the paper Friday, these outbursts or rudeness and incivility have sparked a counter-movement, a much more polite one, we

hope. The bad apples get more than their share of air time. But now champions of other, more redeeming qualities are getting some media attention of their own.

One national newspaper columnist this week called for a return to the kind of humility and solemnity in the national discourse that marked our country in decades past. When the U.S. and its allies emerged victorious in World War II, he wrote, we didn't run around giving high fives. Whatever pride the American people might have felt, they subdued it and simply gave thanks to God the ordeal was over. It was, he wrote, a display of "mass modesty," one current generations should learn.

Here in Charlotte, Orthodox Rabbi Brad Hirschfield came to town to promote his book titled You don't have to be wrong for me to be right. In America, he said, we need to move from a culture of "me" to one of "we."

Many of us welcome that sentiment and pray that it might be so. But, for it to be so, we are well served to pay attention the story of Jesus and the man who could neither hear nor speak.

* * *

We encounter this story as part of Jesus' sweeping tour of what was, for him, foreign territory. Right away, we notice Jesus has left his home region to reach and minister to different kinds of people. He travels to the region of Decapolis, which was a federation of ten cities in a deeply Greek and gentile region. Hearing of Jesus' presence, the friends of a deaf man bring him out and ask Christ to lay hands on the man.

If we take anything away from this story, even just one short verse, it should be verse 35.

"And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released and the man spoke plainly."

Did you hear the sequence of what happened?

First, the man's ears were opened.

As I think I have mentioned from this pulpit before, we should pay attention to the role of hearing in scripture. It's been said that the ear is God's organ of choice, God's preferred way of reaching us. Scripture is full of proof.

But, for God and perhaps for us divided, angry Americans, the ability to hear is only a means to an end. Hearing and listening are not the same thing. For cell phone companies, the question may be "Can you hear me now?"

But with God as with our need to understand each other, the more important question is: “Are you listening to me, now?”

Are we listening? When we hear a point of view we may not share, do we dismiss the one speaking? Do we put them in a simple box or debase them by grouping them with others we dismiss?

Or do we listen for what’s behind the words, what the person may be feeling even if their words have sharp edges.

It’s been said by many that fear is at the root of a lot of the shouting and the hostile accusations these days. I think there is something to that. People are suffering. They are run ragged and uncertain. As a result, people cling to something they can get their heads and hearts around. In a world full of gray, they want black and white and they draw lines in the sand, if only to achieve some sense of control or security. All these things and more clog our ears and keep us from hearing and, more important, listening to others.

In the story of Jesus and the deaf man, Jesus doesn’t command the man to open his own ears. Instead, Jesus looks to the heavens and asks for God’s intervention for the man’s ears to “be opened,” a reminder that we can do nothing without God.

The second thing that happens there in verse 35 is that the man’s tongue is released. According to the Greek, the man is not mute. The text says he has a “speech difficulty.”

Makes sense, doesn’t it? If you can’t hear, you can’t listen and if you can’t listen, you are going to have trouble speaking and being understood. You don’t know how to form the words. It’s a physiological for the man in the story and a metaphorical truth for the rest of us.

In America, way too often, we’re speaking without listening first. We’re hurling soundbites and talking points at each other like darts. Or we’re just mumbling, not honoring the other person by trying to express ourselves with thought and intention. Let us pray that as a nation, as with the man in the story, our tongues might be released from their normally broken and twisted ways.

Third and finally, the man spoke plainly. His ears opened, his tongue healed, he proclaims Jesus, the good news made flesh, come into the world to heal us all.

Part of the poignancy of this story in the gospel of Mark is how it contrasts this man of such faith with the disciples. The disciples are with Jesus day and night but they repeatedly fail to recognize him as the messiah. The man in this story and his friends, on the other hand, immediately proclaim Jesus to be who he is, the one who heals us.

So what do we make of this story and relate it to what's going on in America?

Just as Jesus went into a foreign region to reach those who were not like him, we may feel sometimes like we are in a foreign land. We may look for familiar signs and landmarks, maybe even things that look to us like that are black and white, reliable and familiar. Or we may be stepping boldly into this new era in our country, welcoming its difference and change as long overdue.

Either way, it seems, we are in between. One commentator offered the viewpoint that what we are experiencing is the swing of society's pendulum, from humble conformity and self-effacement of prior generations to the 'expressive individualism' of the current generation, the triumph, for at least the time being, of "me" over "we." Many of us pray for the pendulum to swing back toward a society of 'we' as reflected in Christ's teachings.

We walk in complex times, an in-between time in the life of our nation, to be sure, but also for our world. As important as it is to open our ears, along with our hearts and our minds to others' points of view and, then, to listen to them ... as important as it is for our tongues to be released from words that demean, accuse or abuse others ... we first must be healed. In Christ, we have God's pledge, God's invitation to be healed and, then, to be an agent of healing in the world.

The apostle Paul knew something of what it means to live in times like these as reflected in his words to the first-century church at Rome.

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope, we are saved. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

Friends, we may look around this busted up world and lose heart. But Paul was saying that there is more than what we can see. And with patience, through faith, we are assured the things we hope for will come about through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

"Jesus said to the man who could not hear and had trouble speaking, 'Ephphatha,' which means 'Be opened.' "

Amen.