

MARK 7:31–37. (EHV)

Jesus left the region of Tyre again and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of the Decapolis. They brought a man to him who was deaf and had a speech impediment. They pleaded with Jesus to place his hand on him. Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd. He put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. After he looked up to heaven, he sighed and said, "*Ephphatha!*" (which means "*Be opened!*") Immediately the man's ears were opened, his tongue was set free, and he began to speak plainly. Jesus gave the people strict orders to tell no one, but the more he did so, the more they kept proclaiming it. They were amazed beyond measure and said, "He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak!"

A little levity to begin the sermon today: What do John the Baptist and Kermit the Frog have in common? They have the same middle name.

A more serious question: What do a man from the Decapolis in the first century AD and you and I have in common? Much more than you might initially think.

1.

Jesus had been in the region of Tyre and Sidon, along Mediterranean coast northwest of Galilee. That was where he had cast out the demon from the Canaanite woman's daughter—the Canaanite woman whose faith was so tenacious that she wouldn't stop pleading with Jesus until he granted her request. Jesus then appears to have traveled in an arc—first heading north to Sidon, before heading east and south down along the eastern coast of the Sea of Galilee until he reached the region of the Decapolis, a Gentile area consisting of ten self-governing city-states.

The last time Jesus was in this area, the people who heard about him and saw what he did had made an enormous mistake. They had begged him to leave. Jesus had healed two demon-possessed men, two men whose demons identified themselves as Legion, which suggests that they were possessed by many demons, hundreds, if not thousands. When Jesus cast out those demons, they entered into a herd of pigs numbering about 2,000, which all rushed over the steep bank and drowned in the Sea of Galilee. The people of the region, though, didn't see a savior and helper. They saw a threat to their economy and a magic man, whose magic was more powerful, and perhaps therefore more dangerous, than the power of the demons who had possessed the two men. So they begged Jesus to leave. Can you imagine that?

But Jesus had mercy on them. He left behind a missionary, maybe two. Mark and Luke tell us that at least one of the men formerly possessed by demons wanted to leave the region with Jesus, but Jesus told him instead to go home and tell his family and the people of his hometown how much the Lord had done for him. And that's exactly what the man did. He not only told his family and hometown, but began to tell all over the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him.

And now Jesus is back. And guess what? They aren't pleading with him to leave their region anymore. They're thronging to him. And they're bringing other people in need with them. Mark is the only one who records this particular man—a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Deafness and speech impediments often go together; if you can't hear, it's difficult to learn how to speak. Now we're not told that this man was demon-possessed in the technical

sense. But later Mark describes his ears being opened and his tongue being set free; what Mark literally says in Greek is that the chain on his tongue was undone. Which reminds us that even when sicknesses, diseases, handicaps, and impediments are not the result of demon-possession, the devil and his demons are still involved. Our problems are rarely, if ever, purely physical problems. The devil and his demons are installing invisible blockages here, fastening invisible chains there, disconnecting nerve endings, carrying this virus from here to there and blowing on it like coals, and causing other untold harm. They are always trying to create misery for the human race. They aren't just content to mislead our souls and drag us down to hell. They also want our life on earth to be a foretaste of hell as much as possible.

And Jesus allows them some leeway in that regard. They themselves are still on a chain as they do so, and they are limited in the damage they can cause, but Jesus does allow them to cause some damage, just as he did with Job in the Old Testament. In this case, he allowed this man to be inflicted with deafness and a speech impediment, but he did this precisely so that this man could come to know Jesus as the one who gives hearing and speech.

These people brought this man to Jesus and pleaded with Jesus to place his hand on him. They no doubt wanted a public, showy miracle that they could gawk at and cheer about. But that would have been a selfish exploitation of this man's maladies. Who knows if this man even knew why he was there. The crowd might have simply discovered him on the way, grabbed him, and dragged him along just to make for a bigger show. But whenever people tell Jesus exactly what to do, he does something different. He is Lord, not we. Jesus takes the man "aside in private, away from the crowd." Now that the time has come to heal him, Jesus wants to make sure the man is set at ease and knows that Jesus is doing this just for him, out of love for him, and not for fame or to put on a show.

But what a strange way he goes about it! First, he thrusts his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spits, presumably on his fingertips, and then touches the man's tongue. What is Jesus doing here? Well, he is obviously showing the man with sign language, the only language the man understands, that he knows what is wrong with him. There is something wrong with his ears and his tongue. And in showing him that he knows that, he is probably also letting him know what he is about to do. But why didn't he just touch his outer ears, instead of thrusting his fingers into them? Why didn't he just touch the man's lips, instead of making the man open his mouth so that he could touch the man's tongue with his own spit? Ultimately, we don't know. But we can tell that Jesus knew why. He knew this man's heart and he knew that this was exactly what he needed.

Then Jesus looks up to heaven—and how poignant and touching is this! He sighs. To capture the audible nature of this sigh, the NIV says that he had a deep sigh. It was probably more like a painful groan than a sigh. How much was in that sigh? The deaf, speech-impaired man couldn't hear the sigh, which shows that Jesus wasn't doing it so much for the man, but because he felt genuine grief and compassion over this man's condition. Nevertheless, the man could certainly see the look of pain on Jesus's face, could see his mouth open slightly and his chest heave, with his eyes toward the sky. I don't know everything that was in that sigh. But some of his thoughts must have been back in the Garden of Eden, re-watching Eve take the forbidden fruit and then hand some to Adam and thinking, "Mankind, what have you done to yourselves?" Some of his thoughts must have been following the devil and his

demons as they continued to wander back and forth in the earth trying to carry out sinister plots, throwing the poisonous darts of their lies here and there, and causing pain and heartache all around. And doubtless some of his thoughts were inside this man's heart, feeling the frustration of not being able to hear what other people were saying, of not being able to hear the beautiful sounds of nature, of not being able to express his wishes or his gratitude, of not being able to share his heart with others through words, of not being able to give voice to his happiness or sorrow in song. "Heavenly Father, I know you feel it too. You love him too. Hear me, and let me help him."

Then Jesus says to the man, "*Ephphatha!*" in Aramaic, which means, "Be opened!" So much to ponder here. Why did Jesus pick Aramaic? That was his own native language, but he obviously knew that that was this man's native language too, the language he was most familiar with from his sight-reading of people's lips. Yet Jesus isn't just mouthing these words; he is actually speaking them...to a man who cannot hear. Why? Jesus is showing the man that his signs—his thrusting of his fingers into the man's ears and his touching the man's tongue with his spit—mean nothing and accomplish nothing without his word. And he is showing us that ultimately it doesn't matter if there is no capacity to receive his healing, life-giving word. His word has the power to create the capacity to receive it, in addition to actually giving healing and life. God called out, "Let there be light," in the beginning to the void of darkness, and there was light. God calls out, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," to little babies who do not yet know the language those words are spoken in or how to process it, but they receive those words just fine, just as the deaf man received these words just fine.

And then there are the words themselves: "Be opened!" Not, "Open up now!" Not, "Okay, hear and speak!" Those words in the active voice could have conveyed the false impression that this man had the capability to open himself, the capability to hear and to speak in himself, the capability to remove the demons' blockages in his ears and to undo the demons' chain on his tongue in himself. But he didn't have that capability any more than he had the capability to hear Jesus's words. Not, "Open yourself," but, "Be opened by me!" That was the only way this man would hear and talk—not by his own work or effort, but by faith in the only One who could do it.

And those words shattered the demons' invisible earplugs and tore apart the invisible chain on the man's tongue. Not only that, but Jesus's words also removed and fixed every other hindrance that had kept him from learning proper speech and grammar up to that point. Jesus's words traveled through the man's ear canals unobstructed and down into the man's heart, and from there the man's own thoughts came back up through his vocal cords and out his mouth unobstructed. "Immediately the man's ears were opened, his tongue was set free, and he began to speak plainly."

"Be opened!" was the command—no, more like the invitation—that Jesus had to extend to this man so that he could both hear and talk.

2.

And that is the same powerful invitation Jesus has to extend to us too.

Let's return to Jesus's sigh. We explored a few things that were probably on Jesus's heart. But all of those things that we saw Jesus sighing about were behind every malady he encountered. So why do we only hear him actually sighing about this one?

Think about the maladies that afflicted this man—inability to hear and inability to speak. These are at the heart of God's plan of salvation, aren't they? What does Paul say to the Ephesians? "It is by grace you have been saved, through *faith*." And what does Paul say to the Romans? "Faith comes from *hearing* the message, and the message is *heard* through the word about Christ." It isn't impossible for a deaf person to believe in Jesus, but it's certainly a lot harder to communicate the gospel clearly to him or her. And receiving clear gospel communication is vital for salvation. Under ordinary circumstances, faith comes from hearing the gospel.

And once the gospel is heard and believed, then what? As soon as you pour water into a beaker, there isn't only water going in a downward direction, but also in an upward direction as the beaker fills up and the water works its way back up to the neck until it bubbles over. The same is true of the gospel and faith. When the gospel is poured into our ears, so to speak, and makes it all the way to our hearts so that faith is kindled, that faith can only do one thing: It must work its way up to our necks and mouths so that it bubbles over there. As Paul says in Romans, when we believe, we speak. When we believe, we confess our faith. When we believe, we call on the name of the Lord. And that in turn leads to other people hearing and believing, and the cycle continues, generation after generation.

Hearing and speaking are at the heart of our faith. Sin and its effects and the wiles of the demons had ruined both for this man. These physical maladies also affected his spiritual health.

By nature we have the same problem. We might not have this man's physical maladies. We might be able to hear our siblings whispering on the other side of the house or we might be the captain of our forensics team, but by nature we have spiritual earplugs and spiritual chains on our tongue. We are like babies who hear clearly but don't understand, and since we don't understand with our hearing, we're not able to share the truth with our mouths either.

But the miracle Jesus performed on this man reminds us of the miracle he performed on us, the miracle he continues to perform on us. He didn't thrust his fingers into our ears, but he did use a minister's fingers to pour water on our heads—a sign that, just like Jesus's sign to this man, didn't have any power by itself, but it was combined with his powerful "*Ephphatha!*", namely, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." His Word was spoken to deaf ears, to ears that did not have their own capacity to receive spiritual truth. His Word created both the capacity to hear and the actual understanding of faith.

Through the preaching and teaching of his Word by your parents and by other public ministers, he continued and continues to speak his powerful, "*Ephphatha!*", "Be opened!", so that the paths that have been opened to your heart are not roadblocked by the devil once again.

Through the Lord's Supper, he does not put his fingers and spit on your tongue, but he does put bread and wine on your tongue—another sign that doesn't have any power by itself, but is combined with his powerful "Be opened!", namely, "This is my body, given for you," "This is my blood, which was poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." Through his Word, he gives you his actual body and blood in the bread and wine, not only re-clearing the path to your heart, but also undoing any chains the devil was seeking to reattach to your tongue.

Because of the work of Jesus, our ears and hearts and tongues have been opened to confess with these people, “Jesus does everything well. Yes, even when he allows people to become deaf and mute, even when he allows distress, disease, and grief to come into their life, he does everything well. He alone gives us understanding. He alone teaches us to praise and pray. He alone gives us a truthful message worth sharing. He alone brings the eternal healing and hope we need the most. He does everything well.”

“Be opened!” Jesus said to the man from the Decapolis. “Be opened!” Jesus says to all of us today. That is, “Be gone, Satan and all you demons! Be opened by my power, ears and hearts and tongues, to understand the truth of God, to believe it, and to confess it.” Amen, Jesus, let us be opened by your word. You do all things well. Amen.