

Sermon on Mark 7:31-37 for 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church – Pastor Nate Scharf

You all know people who talk a lot with their hands. My sister Cindy is an extreme case, speaks nothing without a hand gesture. She knows English and Spanish, but I don't think she knows sign language. When cell phones first came out, even if we couldn't hear the conversation she was having at a distance, we would try to piece together what she was talking about by her hand gestures and facial expressions. While we could peg the emotion occasionally, I don't think we got the substance of her conversation right very often. Truth be told, even with all our modern communication and lessons on communication it is all too easy to misunderstand and to be misunderstood.

Today we marvel at the master communicator who spoke perfectly, lived perfectly and communicated perfectly. Jesus did a great thing for a deaf and mute man living in the Decapolis. **Jesus does great things for each one of us.**

*<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. <sup>a</sup> <sup>32</sup> There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him. <sup>33</sup> After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. <sup>34</sup> He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). <sup>35</sup> At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. <sup>36</sup> Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. <sup>37</sup> People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." (NIV 2011).*

In Jesus' day, stigmas often accompanied a disability, deformity or abnormality. People questioned, "Who sinned – this person or their parents?" (John 9). Superstition possibly, or simply our sinful mind's best reasoning on why someone was born with a struggle or it was foisted upon them for no apparent reason. If we can't blame God then we have to blame someone. Maybe the deaf person and their parents wondered too, "What sin did we commit?" What a burden to bear!

I did a cursory search on the origins of sign language and the best I can come up with is that our modern uniform system of sign was carried over from France with origins dating to the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. Before that it appears people who were deaf developed a localized version of sign language with those

who were close to them. Outside your community you were out of luck. If you've ever been the lone English speaker in another country with no one to translate you maybe had a very small taste of this frustration and fear if you tried to communicate anything more than "bathroom" or your need for a beverage. Imagine how difficult it was to try to communicate ideas, questions, even the Gospel?!?

When the people of the Decapolis region heard Jesus was among them how did they communicate this to the man who was deaf and dumb? Did he know Jesus was prophet, Messiah, Son of God or did he simply trust them that they were taking him to somewhere/someone good? I don't know, but Jesus knew just what to do, and how to communicate with him.

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Jesus takes this man away from the crowd. Crowds are generally confused, now imagine you can't hear a word of what is going on there. Jesus takes him aside to where there are less distractions, maybe less fear. Jesus sticks his fingers in the man's ears. When my friends did that I would often swing with an elbow to bat them away. Jesus isn't playing games or putting him down. Jesus communicates to the man – this is about your ears. Jesus spits –expectorating from his mouth and touches the man's tongue. Even fewer people have touched my tongue. How weird. But for this man – Jesus knows about his tongue. He is going to do something about this. Jesus looked up to heaven. Who is in heaven? God is. Jesus sighed deeply. Was it a prayer, a recognition of the sad state of this world and our troubles because of our sins or our sinful world, or was it deep emotion and concern, or all of this? Mark records for us the exact words – untranslated – so that we can hear what it sounded like from Jesus' own mouth – like when Jesus raised the girl from the dead – "*Talitha Koum*" (Mark 5:41) or Jesus suffered hell for us as our substitute and was forsaken by his father, "*eloi, eloi, lema sabachtani*" (Mark 15:34). Here there is silence, silence, silence, silence and then boom, "*Ephphatha.*" "Be Opened." Jesus communicated so this man would understand. And so this man could truly hear and see the Son of God in the flesh – Jesus, the Christ.

It was one of the craziest years of my life – new school, new friends, new sport, and new subjects. Freshman Football was going great until it wasn't. I got

to be starting center for one game, except that I couldn't get the ball up to the quarterback in time and get my arms back up to block the onslaught of defensive linemen and linebackers. They discovered the weakness and the game went poorly. Then in practice a week later I broke my ankle, pretty badly – cried like a baby, a mad and sad baby. After surgery and some screws I was laying in the hospital bed and my mind was racing to find the sin for which God must be punishing me. Was it an old sin I had covered up or one I didn't know but God must be raging about?

What do you struggle with? What is your hardship that makes you think God is trying to break you or pay you back? Why did God let this happen to me? Why did God allow my loved one to die? Why doesn't God take this away from me? Who sinned, this one or his parents? God says he's love, but don't you sometimes feel like he's turned away from you, and truth be told, don't we deserve it? Is God silent in our suffering?

The people in the crowd wanted Jesus to put his hand on the man and heal him. Maybe he had done that with other people who were healed – quick and easy. Maybe they had heard that that was the trick for Jesus – lay a hand on and boom – healed. Jesus had something better in store. It wasn't for the crowd to surround him and see. Jesus took the man aside – just him and Jesus. And he helped the man understand what he was doing and by a miracle who Jesus truly is – true God in the flesh for him, for all.

Jesus comes to you, maybe not in the show you'd like, or the exact answer in the exact way to your prayer at the time you think is best. Jesus knows what is best for you, for his kingdom and for all mankind. Jesus sticks his fingers in your ears and opens them to help you recognize your sin and complete unworthiness, so you can understand how life-changing it is that he is your perfect substitute. Through his suffering and sacrifice he has paid the just penalty of your sin. When you hear the pastor or a fellow Christian pronounce forgiveness to you, you know it is real. Jesus spits and touches your tongue so you can taste – taste and see that the Lord is good – as you receive Christ's own body and blood in, with and under the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper as proof that you, this is for you, you are forgiven. Your mouth is opened to speak his love to self and all those around you. Jesus helps you to see and feel not only the waters of your baptism, but every baptism that happens here so you are reminded of how you have been made God's own child – baptized into his name, clothed with Christ's perfection and set free to live and run in God's commands and to love one

another and serve one another without the burdens and the guilt and the shame because those have been washed away.

All God's promises are yes in Jesus Christ. How many prayers for yourself and others has God granted? How many prayers for yourself and others has God given you better than what you prayed for and at a better time? How many times hasn't God taught you something, strengthened you, helped you and continues to help you through the awfulness of this world and our own sinfulness to see, hear, and taste anew his love, his forgiveness and his path for you?

*"At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."* They were overwhelmed with God's love, mercy and power. Aren't you as well as you consider the great gifts God has given to you, the heaven that awaits you, and his presence every hour and mercies new every morning? God has not told us to keep quiet. Testify to God's love for you in the good times, but especially in the trials. Rest in God's forgiveness and love, his mercy and his power for you. Let others know that this same Savior, same God is theirs.

As I lay in that hospital bed, a pastor came to visit me. He reminded me that God does not punish us as our sins deserve. If he did, we'd all be in hell. Our Father punished Jesus for every one of my sins and the sins of the world. We are forgiven. But God allows/even sends these things into our lives, and he uses them for a good purpose, to accomplish what he designs for me and the good of others to help us see Him.

May God grant you ears to hear His message, eyes to see what a great salvation you too have been given, a tongue to taste and see that the Lord is good and to testify especially in the trials how *"He has done everything well"* for us and for all. In fact, **Jesus does great things for each one of us.** Amen.