

HOW'S YOUR HEARING?

Text: Mark 7: 31-37

September 8, 2024

CONKLIN

Two elderly men were talking together. One of them was bragging a little. "I just purchased the most expensive hearing aid ever made", he said. "It's imported and it's guaranteed for life". His friend was impressed. He asked, "What kind is it?" The first man looked at his watch and replied, "Five past two".

Today's scripture is about a man with a hearing and a speaking problem. His story is symptomatic and symbolic of our human condition. It offers both hope and challenge. It also reminds us of our need to hear and speak God's gospel and truth.

Our text from Mark starts mid-seventh chapter. Jesus has given the Pharisees a lesson in "cleanliness" and what really matters. He then goes into the region of Tyre and Sidon, deep into Gentile territory, where he heals the daughter of a Gentile woman. In so doing he demonstrates that no one is outside the realm of God's love. God's compassion and grace includes all God's children.

Jesus then travels to the region of the Decapolis near Galilee. The Decapolis was a string of ten Greek colonies right in the middle of the Jewish heartland. Once again Jesus' journey is interrupted by someone's need.

They brought him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech. They begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears. He spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha", that is, "Be opened". Immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released and he spoke plainly.

This is one of the few places where a healing is described with such detail. We get another glimpse of Jesus' compassion and concern for anyone in need. We see once more the wide expansiveness of God's love and mercy. The world then and now draws lines. God's grace crosses them out and walks over them.

Note that Jesus doesn't put the man on display. He doesn't use him to make a point. He draws him away from the crowd. He puts his fingers in the man's ears. He spits and touches the man's tongue. He lifts his eyes to God and cries out, "*Be opened*". God hears his prayer and answers it. At once the man is able to hear and speak clearly. It's a witness to the healing power of Jesus at work.

The key word in this story is "***Ephphatha***", "*Be opened*". For the man it meant that he could now hear and speak clearly. "*Be opened*". What does Jesus' word mean for us today as his followers?

While we may not share that man's physical affliction, we do share his need for healing. We too need Jesus to touch us and say "*Ephphatha*", "*be open*". We need our ears opened so we can hear and listen to God and to one another. We need the impediments removed from our speaking so we can say clearly the needed word, the helpful word, the loving word to one another. The promise is that what Jesus did for that man, he will also do for us.

Jesus opened the man's ears. He wants to open ours also. One of the first things Jesus wants us to hear is the word of God's grace and love. He wants us to know—to believe—to accept—to take as a daily truth that God loves us and cares about us. He wants us to let that be the defining word about who we are.

One woman shares this story about a moment when her ears were opened to hear that truth.

I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate. When I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen

lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech. When they asked, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the second grade we all adored. Mrs. Leonard was her name. She was short, round, and happy; a sparkling lady.

Annually we had a hearing test. Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class. Finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something. We'd have to repeat it back. Usually she said things like "The sky is blue" or "Do you have new shoes?"

I waited. God must have put the word that I heard into her mouth. They were seven words that changed my life. What Mrs. Leonard whispered to me that day was this, "I wish you were my little girl."

That's the word God "*whispers*" to us in Jesus. You are mine. I want you. I love you. There's nothing you've done or can do to change or destroy my love for you. There nothing for which you can't be forgiven. There's no situation you'll face where I won't be there with you. There's no hurt I can't heal. Those are the truths about ourselves out of which God wants us to live. That's what God wants us to hear.

God wants us to hear his word. God also wants us to be able to hear others. God wants us to listen to the cries of those around us. Those with ears opened by Jesus can't close them to the suffering sounds of their brothers and sisters. They can't shut their eyes to the pain of the world. They can't live as though others' needs don't matter to them. Theodore Reik calls this "*listening with the third ear*" or "*listening with the heart*". It means taking the time and patience to hear not only the words of other persons but also what's underneath those words. It means recognizing the fear in the anger, the pain hidden in the criticism and even the hurt in the silence.

Larry Patten is a United Methodist pastor. He shares his learning about the importance of such hearing. He posted this on his blog:

Each week I write these "And Yet" reflections, digitally and naïvely hurling them into the vast Internet—rarely knowing if they're read. I feel blessed to have stumbled into a part-time job with a local hospice. There, I spend the bulk of my time on the phone with bereavement calls... if I get to talk to a person (maybe 22% of the time), rather than leave a message (maybe 71% of the time), I'll usually say nothing more original than "how are you doing?" Then—though this is the single most important part—I'll listen. In hospice there are "no words of my mouth," only a desire to offer my ears and let a fellow fragile human talk or not talk.

That's what we're called to do. We "offer our ears". We listen to the sounds and the silence of our fellow human beings. It's a means of healing and hope.

Jesus says, "Ephphatha!" "Be open". One writer calls this, "**the prayer for believers**". Jesus says it to us. He prays it for us. It invites new possibilities. It calls for changes. It challenges us. Where do we need to be opened? Is it to a new idea or understanding? Is it to a new way of doing things? Where have we shut our hearts—to whom? How have we closed our minds? Will we let him touch us and open us?

Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

Jesus tells the crowd not to say anything. And immediately they disobey him. They start telling the story loudly and boldly. Clayton Schmidt, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, commenting on this text writes: *God's people today are much better at obeying this strange command of Jesus, the warning to keep the secret. Most of his other commands are a challenge even to believers. How can we really turn the other cheek? Go the extra mile? Love our enemies? Forgive unceasingly? Love God*

with all our heart and souls and mind? These things come hard. They're difficult commands to follow.

Finally in this story, we have an admonition from Jesus that's easy to follow. We all too gladly keep his secret. The crowd did not obey. But we do.

Jesus opened the man's ears. He also opened his mouth. That's another reason we need this particular text. Its reminder is the task before us. We're the recipients of God's grace. We're also the messengers of it. One pastor asks, *"If you're enthused about the difference that Christ Jesus makes in your life, why wouldn't you find a meaningful way to let people know... and to share at least a piece of that joy?"*

Have you found any of those things in your relationship with Jesus? Have you heard the word he offers you about having life now and eternally? Have you discovered a new way of looking at life and others because of him? If he's opened your heart or your eyes; then how will you speak and share that good news with another?

Henri Nouwen was a Roman Catholic priest. After nearly two decades of teaching at the Menninger Clinic in Kansas and at the Universities of Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard, Father Nouwen spent the last years of his life with mentally handicapped people at the L'Arche community of Daybreak in Toronto, Canada. He writes of his experience in sharing and hearing God's word there.

I'd like to tell you a little story about our community. One of my friends there is quite handicapped but is a wonderful, wonderful lady. She said to me, "Henri, can you bless me?" I remember walking up to her and giving her a little cross on her forehead. She said, "No, that is not what I mean." I was embarrassed and said, "I gave you a blessing." She said, "No, I want to be blessed." I kept thinking, "What does she mean?"

We had a little service. All these people were sitting there. After the service I said, "Janet wants a blessing." I had on an alb and a long robe with long sleeves. Janet walked up to me and said, "I want to be blessed." She put her head against my chest. I

spontaneously put my arms around her, held her, and looked right into her eyes. I said, "Blessed are you, Janet. You know how much we love you. You know how important you are. You know what a good woman you are." She looked at me and said, "Yes, yes, yes, I know."

I suddenly saw all sorts of energy coming back to her. She seemed to be relieved from the feeling of depression because suddenly she realized again she was blessed. She went back to her place. Immediately other people said, "I want that kind of blessing, too."

The people kept walking up to me and I suddenly found myself embracing them. I remember that after that, one of the people in our community who assists the handicapped, a strong guy, a football player, said, "Henri, can I have a blessing, too?" I remember our standing there in front of each other and I said, "John." I put my hand on his shoulder, "You are blessed. You are a good person. God loves you. We love you. You are important. Can you claim that and live as the blessed one?"

Nouwen adds, "I think it's very important that when we're in touch with our blessedness that we can then bless other people. People need our blessing..."

When we know we have been blessed we can bless others. We've been blessed by hearing God's word to us. Who you gonna bless today?

Immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released and he spoke plainly. As that ancient Egyptian proverb says, "*When hearing is good, speaking is good.*" How good is our hearing? How well do we speak? May God continue to open our ears, our hearts and also our mouths. Amen.