

“EPHPHATHA”

Mark 7:31-37

Iowa State has settled down after several years of rapid growth. But still students have to deal with finding a space to live in off campus. One solution was offered to provide 10 top places where Iowa State could “stuff” students—houseboats on Lake Laverne, local rabbit warrens with all the rabbits around, residence hall stairwells, the Jack Trice End Zone Club, faculty members’ houses, the roof of Hilton Coliseum, women’s rooms in the engineering buildings, the power plant, central campus, and of course their own homes.

Campus isn’t the only thing that gets “stuffed” this time of year. Families have calendars that have parents shuffling between locations like they are working full time for Uber. Students can feel like this:



“Mr. Osborne, may I be excused? My brain is full.”

In addition to all the responsibilities we have as students, workers, and parents, there are all the things that modern life “stuffs” into our lives. Studies show that we have less free time than people did 20-30 years ago. But a lot of that is due to how we let things get “stuffed” into us. Think of the time spent checking texts and “snap-chats,” getting distracted on the internet, watching U-tube videos, and always being “plugged-in.” It is like the difference between putting rocks and sand in a glass jar. Though they both fill up the space, there is a lot less room for water in the sand.

The man Jesus encounters in our Gospel lesson doesn’t have a problem with being “stuffed.” His problem is deafness. How can he be filled with God’s love when he can’t hear God’s Word? In the older translation of the Bible people like him are called “deaf and dumb.” In the past, if you couldn’t hear, you couldn’t learn language. The blind were disabled, but they could learn, learn to talk, and not in any way be considered “dumb” or “stupid.” But the deaf were thought to be that way. If they did talk, it sounded like someone who was mentally challenged. How can this man’s life ever be opened to God?

We may not be deaf, but we are so often so “stuffed” that there is little room for God in our lives. We know scientifically that images on the internet are addictive and even more so can actually damage the brain if they are pornographic. It makes it a lot harder to have images of God in our minds. Studies show how easy it is to not do the big job we need to do and instead do smaller things that are quicker and easier to do. The result is that we fill our waking hours with so much “stuff,” God gets pushed off to the side.

But the man’s deafness does not stop Jesus. He puts His fingers into the man’s ears, spits and touches his tongue, looks up to heaven and says, “Ephphatha,” which means “Be opened!” The man hears and begins to speak clearly!

But how can He open our “stuffed” lives? We know words can get people to do amazing things. People buy products because of the amount of time they have heard about them in advertising. Matt Campbell can motivate players to compete in the Big-12 even if they are not the highest caliber. People are motivated by patriotic words to sacrifice their lives willingly in battle. Isn’t that just what Jesus does with us?

Again we can go back to that man. There is no way to persuade him with words when he can’t hear anything. Jesus has to open his ears, not by suggestion, but by the power of His Word.

Human words can suggest, motivate, command, but they require a response from the hearer to make them come true. Not with God. His Word creates. Out of nothing, God’s Word created the world. God’s Word opened that man’s ears and

tongue and God's Word can even work in our "stuffed" lives.

I went to college outside of New York City in the late 1970's. For a period of several months people in the city lived in panic because of a series of murders by a killer known as "Son of Sam." There was a giant sigh of relief when David Berkowitz was arrested as the killer. He was convicted of killing eight people and wounding seven others. In prison Berkowitz came to faith while reading the Bible and became a model prisoner, active in prison ministry and counseling other inmates. When he was up for parole in 2002 he wrote to the governor: "In all honesty, I believe that I deserve to be in prison for the rest of my life. I have, with God's help, long ago come to terms with my situation and I have accepted my punishment." He sees his life in prison as the calling Jesus has given to help others. He calls himself "Son of Hope" rather than "Son of Sam."

That is what God's Word can do to lives. Water may not seem like much compared to solid rock. But water can seep into the cracks around rocks. Then, when it freezes, it will expand and crack the rock. You can also do that with fire. For centuries people mined in solid rock by heating it with fire, then suddenly cooling it with water.

God's Word works into the cracks and corners of our lives, opening us as Jesus opened the man's ears. God takes that Word and makes it even more real by connecting it to real things in our lives. Notice how before Jesus heals the man it talks about Him going from Tyre through the region of the Decapolis. That is not just facts for some geography nut; it shows us that Jesus went into regions filled with Gentile pagans. Then we hear how we didn't just speak to the man, but put his fingers in his ears and spat and touched his tongue. Those concrete actions, for a man who could not hear, helped lead that man to faith.

Mark records the actual word Jesus used "Ephphatha." Even though the New Testament was written in Greek, Jesus spoke Aramaic; "Ephphatha" is Aramaic for "Be opened." Mark also uses Jesus' original words when He healed the girl with the words, "Talitha cum," when He prayed "Abba-Father" in the Garden of Gethsemane," and when He cried out from the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani—My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" The real words of the real person Jesus who is true God opened up the man's ears. But it also opened up His life. "Ephphatha can also

be translated "Be connected." As Jesus spoke that He looked up to heaven. His words not only opened the man's ears, but his heart. He was connected to the God of heaven.

God connects to us in His Word. God combines His Word with simple water into the power that brings the Holy Spirit and new life even into babies who can't say the name "Jesus." God's Word makes us receive the true body and blood of Jesus as we partake of simple bread and wine in Holy Communion. God's Word speaks through human beings who not only tell us that Word, but live it out by their love to us. That Word, made so real by God, says, "Be opened!" and our lives are. And our lives are connected to God!

Today we resume a new year of Sunday School. We are thankful for the teachers, many who are students, who help us. Sunday School and Bible class are wonderful opportunities for God's Word to work in our lives. We also have other Bible study opportunities like Wednesday 11 AM class for women, Thursday 1 PM class for men, Wednesday 8:30 class for students, Tuesday 8 PM "Fermenting the Faith," and small groups. It isn't just a matter of Bible studies here at this church. You can get involved in a neighborhood or dorm study and let God's Word open your heart.

"Ephphatha"—"Be opened!" God's Word can work its way into our lives!

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September 9, 2018
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, Iowa 50014