

## Be Opened Mark 7:31-37

When I was in college, I shadowed a local pastor as part of my discernment process to figure out if I wanted to be a pastor. I went with him to Bible studies and meetings, got connected with the choir and food pantry at his church, and spent time listening to the wisdom he'd gained over his years of being a pastor. One piece of advice that stuck with me is what he told me about going to seminary, graduate school for becoming a pastor. He told me I needed to remember that I was there to learn, not to show how much I already knew. I needed to be open to what I would be taught.

That's part of coming to college, too. Even if you've taken AP tests or community college classes in high school, you may not know the subject matter the way your professors or TA's here want you to know it. You have to learn how to use the library and all of the electronic resources to find information. You have to learn new programs and lab equipment. You have to be open to learning that you might not know everything already.

That's what makes this Gospel story appropriate for this time in the year, as a new school year is still in its beginning stages. It's a reminder that it's in the opening of ears and eyes and minds and then, in the right order, mouths, that make a school year fruitful.

Our story finds Jesus in the area of the Decapolis, a Gentile region southeast of the Sea of Galilee. This is not home turf (Jewish territory). Jesus is a stranger and a foreigner here, although his name is not unknown. In fact, quite the opposite. As often seems to be the case, wherever he goes, Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker seems to precede him, and his entry into a city is sure to draw a crowd eager

to be healed of their various diseases and demons. So they bring to Jesus "a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment" (Mark 7:32). They want Jesus to lay hands on him in order to heal him according to his usual custom. But Jesus is not a one-size-fits-all kind of God. His compassionate care is always focused and personal. Jesus doesn't only love the whole world. He also loves you and me—and this poor deaf and dumb man.

And so Jesus takes the man away from the crowd. He recognizes the isolation and confusion that so often attend the lives of the deaf. How do you negotiate life without one of your senses? How do you communicate with other people and engage in relationship? They did not have sign language back then! Other than a few gestures and finger pointing, how could you make yourself known to other people, let alone God?

No, Jesus doesn't want to compound the deaf man's discomfort by making a spectacle of him before the crowds. So he takes him aside privately and makes signs that he's going to do something about his problem: he stuffs his fingers into his ears and puts some of his spit on his tongue. It's almost as if Jesus is saying, "Something is about to happen."

Jesus looks up into heaven and prays, and then he looks at the man and says, "Ephphatha," which is the Aramaic word for "Be opened!" (Mark 7:34). "And," Mark tells us, "his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly." That is, he spoke rightly—in a straightforward way. Years of isolation and the walls of separation came apart. No longer would his handicap get in the way of his relationship with God or other people because Jesus healed him and made him whole. "Be

opened!” he said, and his ears and mouth were opened. In fact, after the healing, the man who was healed was so excited that he couldn’t even keep quiet about it!

Yet even with his ears and mouth opened, Jesus told him to close them again. Jesus told him, and the rest of the crowd, to not share what had happened. But they didn’t listen, and Jesus’ reputation and fame spread even more.

Why did Jesus do that? Bible scholars speak of Jesus’ “messianic secret” in Mark and the way that he keeps telling people to keep quiet about his miracles until after his suffering, death, and resurrection. While some think it’s a case of Jesus using reverse psychology to get news of his miracles to spread more widely, it’s really because Jesus is worried they don’t fully understand yet who He is and what He is doing. Only in view of the cross can the Messiah be rightly understood. Jesus didn’t want people to get the wrong idea about him.

That’s why it’s important for us to remember why our ears and mouths are opened. GK Chesterton wrote, “The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.” Our ears are opened to hear God’s word, and then we can trust in the promises found there, building on something solid.

“Be opened!” That’s what Jesus said to the deaf man with the speech problem. And that’s what he says to us today: “Be opened!” Some of you may be hard of hearing. Others of us may have selective hearing! Yet even if your hearing is perfect, you might still have a hearing problem—not a physical problem, but a spiritual one. For although our ears may be in perfect working order, we still may not have ears to hear what God says to us in his Word.

It can be hard to hear God speak above the din of distractions, the various voices clamoring for our attention, and the desperation of our own anxious thoughts. It is especially difficult to hear the Lord if we do not spend time daily in Bible study and prayer. It is nearly impossible to hear God’s voice if we do not gather for worship with other believers. And if we do not believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior, the spiritual silence will be deafening—and deadening. It may well be that our ears are stuffed and our mouths are stopped. We don’t hear what God is saying, so neither do we know what to say in reply. Ultimately, that is what sin is all about: dulling our senses and cutting off our connection with God.

“Be opened!” Jesus commands! And by the power of his Word, our ears are opened and our tongues are loosed. By the power of his Word, the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts to believe in Jesus and receive his message. The Word of Christ accomplishes all things—and does them well. “Be opened!” he says, and that very Word opens our ears and hearts to receive and believe his Word. No less amazing than the healing of the deaf man is the healing of the sinners’ heart by the forgiveness Christ won for us on the cross.

Dare I therefore say to you in this place that’s devoted to Christ’s Word: “Ephphatha! Be opened!” Don’t be deaf and hardened against what God wants to say to you about your sin, your unfaith, your unrighteousness, laziness, self-reliance, or self-satisfaction. But open your heart to His Word of wisdom, so that you can know yourself as He knows you, and so you can learn to know Him as He has revealed Himself in Christ.

It’s intriguing that Mark retains the Aramaic word Jesus used in this healing, Ephphatha, giving it special significance in the story. Many

of the early baptismal rites took up that word of our Lord and repeated it in the preparatory rites of Baptism. The pastor says to the child, “Be opened!” That ritual was declaring that what happened to the deaf man was now happening also to the baptized, that what Jesus said to him He says also to us. The water of Baptism is the spittle of Jesus’ mouth that comes with His promise to make us His children, to separate us from the uncleanness of the world, and, crucially, to open our ears to hear. For Baptism isn’t just the end of an old life, but also the beginning of a new one, one that’s continuously open to hearing Christ’s Word. And then that Word opens our mouths to speak it back to Him, as we sing with Psalm 51, “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise.”

And unlike the deaf man and the crowds in the Decapolis, we have no reason to keep silent or keep the Good News to ourselves. Christ has died and risen from the dead! There isn’t any secret anymore—only “good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” With sins forgiven and hearts made alive by the Word of God, we cannot help but speak of what we have seen and heard. So, as Jesus commands at the end of Mark’s Gospel, “go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). “Be opened!” Amen.

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