

“Be Opened!”

Today is the kickoff of a time in the Church Year when we put forth special effort to educate the youth of our congregation. Last month motorcycle enthusiasts gathered from all over the country and all over the world in a little berg nestled in the foothills of the Black Hills known as Sturgis. The annual rally celebrates motorcycling and the American spirit that accompanies it. Our rally day is about our coming together to celebrate another spirit. We are free to worship without fear, free to teach our children the truth of God’s Word, and free to confess the faith in every corner of the globe. Now is the time to muster the troops! A rally is called to agitate to action. At rallies we’re motivated to do something, to speak something, to draw some inspiration for living.

To help underscore this emphasis on Christian education in our midst, I should be so bold as to draw your attention to Jesus’ words recorded in Mark 7:31-37. (ESV)

Then [Jesus] returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to Him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged Him to lay His hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, He put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, He sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more He charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

Be opened! This is the command that Jesus spoke to the deaf man as He healed him. Putting His fingers into the man’s ears, Jesus then spit and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “Ephphatha” (which means, be opened). At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak. You heard also how Jesus then commanded the people not to tell anyone. But the more He did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He had done all things well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.” This is the story of today’s text.

There are some important lessons that we can learn from this miracle of Jesus, and these lessons relate directly to today’s emphasis on Christian education. Let’s look at the miracle again. Jesus called out to the man who couldn’t hear and couldn’t speak, “Open up!” and immediately the man could hear and could speak. The power of God, operating in and through Jesus, was sufficient to instantly heal the man who had for so long been cut off from communication with the people around him. In an instant, at the sounding of the word from Jesus, he was cured. All Jesus did was say, “Open up,” and the miracle happened. Again, what did it? Jesus’ words.

Scripture records again and again that through the power of His word Jesus healed people. The blind were given sight. Lepers were cleansed of their terrible disease. Even the dead were raised to life. Through His word, Jesus, God’s own Son, brought the power of God into peoples’ lives. He brought the power of His love. That’s why Jesus came down on our earth to suffer, to die, and to rise again. He did that to show us all how great God’s love is; that He was willing to humble Himself, willing to suffer Himself, willing to die Himself...for each of us.

Jesus brought to His ministry all that is necessary for us to have full, abundant, happy lives. The tragedy was that in Jesus' day, so many refused that happiness. So many refused to hear Him, to listen to Him, to obey Him. They could not and would not open themselves to His word, and so they mocked, taunted, tortured and crucified Him. What is so sad is that it is true; that the Jesus-story is not a once-upon-a-time story, something you read to children to put them to sleep. It happened...and would happen again today. Yes, never dare we (you and I) presume that we'd have done so much better. We dare not catch ourselves thinking or saying, "If we would have lived back at the time Jesus lived, you know how it would have been. We'd have stroked His head, or given Him a cold drink of water, or fought with Him against those terrible scribes and Pharisees."

Don't believe it. Instead of listening to Jesus and obeying His Word, what we really would have done would have been getting ourselves involved up to our eyeballs with sports programs and music lessons, tending to the house chores, visiting friends and neighbors, working at our jobs, avoiding leprosy like the plague, basking in the sunshine, or one of scores of other everyday activities not different then than they are now. We would. You know we would. If we would have lived back at the time Jesus lived, we would have behaved the same way a majority of the people then behaved. We wouldn't have wanted to have gotten ourselves involved with this "society-shaker," this rabble-rouser, this political and social outcast, this liberal Jesus. We'd have wanted then what so many of us want today—no involvement, no commitment, no responsibility. And if we'd have come home then from a hard day at the olive press, and sat down in our living room with our feet propped up, and something cool and refreshing in our hand, and someone came and invited us to go down to the synagogue, and hear, and talk to this Jesus...yes, if someone had come to invite you to talk to this Jesus or hear this fellow who's supposed to be so great, our response probably would have been, "Oh I don't think so, I' kind of pooped out tonight. Besides, if He's got something really important to say, we can read about it in the Post tomorrow morning."

Right? Sure it's right. Are we one bit different than the people who lived so long ago? One bit better? One bit brighter? One bit more religiously mature? Don't you believe it. Human nature today perhaps is covered with a very thin veneer of sophistication, but it remains human nature none the less. And human nature has not changed in the slightest form from the time of our earliest ancestors until now. Nor have we changed. That's why the word Jesus spoke to the man who could not hear nor speak, the same word which He spoke really to all of the people that He met in His all too brief life here on earth, is precisely the same identical word which He is continuing to speak to each and every one of us. Yes, today, the Jesus-word to us is the word EPHPHATHA, which means "open up."

Open up! That's what God is saying right now, right here, as He is speaking to every one of us in this church today. Open up! Strip out the impediments, tear down the barriers to hearing and listening to My Word. Open up! He calls to us through the invitations He is offering to study His Word...those invitations He is giving through the calls to Bible study in our Sunday and midweek school, Bible classes, home studies, and week long opportunities to study the Word of God at Peace congregation. Yes, open up!

And what is He hoping our response will be? The psalmist rightly answers: "Make me to know Your ways, O LORD; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; for You I wait all the day long" (Psalm 25:4, 5).

A tract that the Concordia Tract Mission published underscores our need for Bible study, for a thorough searching of God's Word, setting forth the challenge this way: It invites you to discover "Light For Your Path," and then asks this probing question...Which are you where Bible study is concerned—a tourist or an explorer? A tourist travels quickly through the Bible, becoming familiar with

the highly noticeable and well-publicized points of interest. In Bible study, a tourist approaches the task with the mentality of a hurried vacationer. An explorer, on the other hand, is a seeker and a searcher. In Bible study, an explorer seeks truth, challenges, and life-shaping experiences. The psalmist says of the Lord, “I will seek You with all my heart” (Ps. 119:10). “Search the Scriptures,” says Jesus (John 5:39). This is the language of the explorer, the same language we speak in our Bible study and Sunday school endeavors.

So why participate in Bible study? The foremost reason is to behold again the wonder of God’s plan of salvation. Yes, exploring the Scriptures in a planned study rather than merely briefly and occasionally visiting the life-giving Word increases God-pleasing changes taking place in our lives. Celebrating God’s love in Christ also becomes part of our lives. As we share in discovering the heights, and depths, and riches of God’s love, that joy becomes our strength. If we merely glance at Scripture now and then, if like a busy tourist we never come to grips with what we see, we miss our chance to behold, celebrate, and share the beautiful joy we have in Jesus.

This tract then makes this illustration. It says the father of poet Emily Dickenson once did a very strange thing. At dinner time one evening, the fire bell in town began ringing wildly. The townspeople responded by rushing out to see where the fire was. Instead, they saw only Emily’s father, standing by the bell. Excitedly, he explained that he was witnessing one of the most beautiful sunsets he had ever seen, and he didn’t want anyone else to miss it. So he rang the bell to get everyone’s attention before the sunset faded. Emily Dickenson’s father had an explorer’s spirit. He took time to behold, to celebrate, to share the beauty and the joy of God’s love.

By the way, do you children here this morning know any sign language? Do you know the sign that the hearing impaired use for the word “hear” or “listen?” They hold their hand next to their ear like this (cupped hand by ear), or they might also point to the ear. Do you know the sign for prayer? It’s this...(hold up hands in prayer). I’ll give you a tougher one. What sign do you think they use when they really want you to pay close attention to something? They don’t use the same one that they do for “hear” or “listen.” They use a sign that means much more than that. They use a sign that looks like this...(hands are held parallel to face). It’s like your hands are outlining a small hallway in front of your face so you can only look straight down it.

And that is what Jesus wants us to do as we hear and study His Word. He wants us to pay close attention to what He is saying to us, just as He pays close attention to us when we pray, when we talk to Him. Yes, we need to hear God speaking to us. We need to really listen. Only then will we see the marvels of His love, only then will we be able to say: “He has done all things well.” That, by the way, is one of the key lessons of our text, the words that our Synod adopted for its triennial theme some years back. “He has done all things well.”

The people on seeing Jesus’ miracle of healing of the deaf man could not contain themselves, Mark records. “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 all things well,’ they said. ‘He even makes the deaf hear and the mute to speak.’” In our text Jesus does what He must do. He does what needs to be done—He brings God to the people in a word and a touch. He does not do anything to amaze or impress, yet His actions are so amazing and impressive that the people cannot keep quiet about them.

“He had done all things well” are not words Jesus longed to hear though. He did not want to anything “well,” because He did not need or want recognition. He simply set about doing the work that needed to be done. And that is all that Jesus is calling us to do. To equip ourselves with the power of His love, which is found in His Word, yes...found in His Word and Sacraments; to equip ourselves with that power so that the spiritually deaf and mute around us will know that we are with

them in their struggles, yes, so that our helpless world will see how God and His Son, Jesus, can give them the power that turns defeat into victory. And that power, that victory, is ours as we open up to His Word, as we regularly praise Him for all that He has done so well for us.

There is an old limerick that goes something like this:

GOD MADE THE WORLD GOOD IN THE BEGINNING,
MAN SPOILED CREATION BY SINNING.
WE KNOW THAT THE STORY
WILL END IN GOD'S GLORY,
BUT AT PRESENT THE OTHER SIDE'S WINNING.

How do we start winning? By connection ourselves to the power. By connecting ourselves to God's Word. There we learn that Jesus through the healing miracle of His love brought and is still bringing our world a new creation. By sinning, we keep spoiling God's world. Jesus, through forgiveness, keeps bringing beauty back into the world. What Jesus "does well" is to bring new birth to each one of us. Each day because of our Baptism we are created anew in God's image. We are healed of sin by the same Christ who brought new hearing to a deaf man with a speech impediment. In Christ, God looks at the new creation in each of us and sees that it is good. So, open up! Yes, our ears and mouths. And our hearts. And our lives. Open up! And receive all that Jesus has done well for us. That's His Word for us today. Amen.