

# "Opening Ears"

Mark 7:31-37

September 9, 2012

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

*(Begin only in sign language). Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God loves you and forgives you all your sins because of Jesus' death on the cross. He gives you eternal life because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.*

Something's wrong. As the line from the old movie goes, "What we've got here is a failure to communicate." Most of you had no idea what I said. Some of you understood a little. A few could pick out a sign here or there. This is what I said: (Repeat the message.) Now, it's very clear. Would it have helped if I had signed bigger? What if I had signed slower? What if I had told you to pay closer attention? Would any of that have helped? No.

The problem was not in the message. The problem was with you. There was a barrier that prevented you from comprehending what was going on. All of your effort to improve and change that here today would not have helped. As a result, you would have missed out on the message. The message would have done you no good. You have just experienced life as a deaf person. Deafness is a barrier which stops communication and, as a result, deaf people miss out on many things.

For that reason, some people think that deaf people and hearing people are quite different. However, before God, deaf people and hearing people, in heart and spirit, are all deaf! We cannot hear the will of God and we miss out on His message of hope and good news.

The problem is not with the message. The problem is with us. Sin makes us deaf before God. This means more than we do not know God's will, believe the Good News or obey Him. It means we CANNOT know God's will, believe the Good News or obey Him. The Bible says, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them." (1 Cor 2:14)

In our sinful state, apart from the Holy Spirit, we do not accept the things that come from God. The things of God are foolishness to us. We will ignore them. We will reject them. We simply cannot comprehend them, any more than you could comprehend and accept the first part of this sermon.

This means great danger. Before new technology was developed, deaf people would miss a variety of messages that could impact them, both good and bad. Because they could not hear, they would miss storm warnings on the radio and fire alarms in their building. This could lead to serious injury or death. Conversely, because they could not hear, deaf people would miss out on the pleasure of watching a television show or a movie. And, if they were ever in place where they announced the winner of a valuable prize in a drawing, deaf people would miss out on winning that prize if their number was chosen.

Spiritual deafness means much greater danger. The inability to accept, understand, or believe the will of God means that we will miss out on knowing our status as sinners who are condemned to death and hell. I'm sure you know many people today who do not know, accept, or believe this Scriptural truth. But, in this case, ignorance is not bliss. Being unaware of our status as sinners is like being unaware of a diagnosis of cancer within us. If you have cancer and don't know it, you will still die from the cancer. If you have sin and don't know it, you will still die apart from God and spend an eternity in hell, whether you know it or not..

Spiritual deafness means we will also be unaware or unaccepting of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and all that He has done for us. We will not know or not believe and, thus, not receive His holiness by virtue of His holy life lived for us; forgiveness for all of our sins by His sacrificial death on the cross; a new life, beginning now and lasting forever, by virtue of His resurrection from the grave to life again.

For us to try and get out of our condemnation or get these blessings on our own would be like a deaf person trying to listen more carefully. It won't work. We can't try harder to be better. That effort will fail because God's standard is perfection. We can't try harder to believe. It won't work. As

the Scripture says, “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,<sup>1</sup> except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Cor. 12:4) We are cut off, isolated, and separated from God and from each other because we are spiritually deaf.

But Jesus Christ came to save deaf people. We see that in the text today. The encounter begins by some unknown friends of a deaf man bringing him to Jesus that He might lay his hand on him. The deaf man was not seeking out Jesus. He probably had no idea of who Jesus was and what He could do for him.

First, Jesus begins by bringing the deaf man aside from the crowd privately. Jesus wanted no distractions that would keep Him from his work for this man or that would keep this man from receiving the benefits of Jesus’ work.

Secondly, Jesus communicates with the deaf man on his own terms. Jesus does not expect the deaf man to come up to him. Jesus comes down to him to communicate with Him. Jesus puts his fingers in the man’s ears and touches his tongue, indicating that something was going to happen to this man’s ears and tongue. Jesus spits before touching his tongue. It was thought back then that spit had medicinal properties. The deaf man, seeing this, would connect that action with some healing to happen to the places where Jesus touched. Jesus looks up to heaven. Any healing would be the result of God’s power. Jesus sighs, a visual indication that it was going to happen now.

All of this was prologue to the main event. None of these gestures accomplished anything. When Jesus spoke, then it happened. He said, “Ephphatha!”, that is “Be opened!” This Word had power – the power of God. It not only described what would happen. It not only commanded what would happen. The Word of God caused it to happen. The man’s ears were opened! The Word of God overcame deafness and allowed the deaf man to hear.

Jesus has dealt in a similar way with us who are spiritually deaf. Our encounter with Jesus often begins with someone bringing us to Him. On our own, we don’t know who this Jesus is or what He can do for us. But our parents brought us to the font to be baptized when we were infants.

Friends brought us to Sunday School when we were children. Someone we knew invited us to a Bible Class or Divine Service when we were adults.

By doing this, Jesus is able to draw us away from the crowds, the worries, and the pressures of life. In the sanctuary or later on in the Sunday School classroom, Jesus provides an environment where there is no distraction that would keep Him from His work for us or keep us from receiving the benefits of His work for us.

Jesus begins communicating with us. He does not expect us to rise to the loftiness of heaven. Rather, He comes down to us. He communicates simply and ways that we can understand. He sends preachers and Sunday School teachers to speak in our language to us. He provides us with lessons and written materials to help us.

Like in our text for today, all of this is prologue. The beautiful sanctuary, the comfortable classroom, the easy to understand preacher, and the loving Sunday School teacher mean nothing without what is about to come. The Word of God is spoken. It is read from the lectern. It is preached from the pulpit. It is taught in the classroom. This Word has power – the power of God. It not only describes what Christ has done for us. It not only promises benefits from what Christ has done for us. The Word of God causes those promises to come true and gives the benefits it describes. It opens our spiritually deaf hearts, allowing us to hear and receive God's gifts.

Martin Luther said in his explanation to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel." As Paul reminds us, this Gospel – this Good News – is powerful. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." (Rom. 1:16)

The Gospel brings us the forgiveness for all of our sins through Jesus' death on the cross. The Gospel brings us Jesus' own holiness in Holy Baptism by virtue of Jesus' perfect life in fulfillment of all of God's Law. The Gospel brings us a new life, also in our baptism, by virtue of Jesus' resurrection

from the dead. It is a life which sin cannot ruin and death cannot stop. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit and the power of God's Word, we hear and receive all that God has for us.

But that's not all. The deaf man in our story had another problem. He couldn't hear and he couldn't speak clearly. He had a speech impediment. The reason some deaf people don't speak clearly is because they can't hear clearly. But, when Jesus healed the man so he could hear clearly, he could then also speak clearly. And I bet, from that time forward, he spoke to anyone who would listen about who Jesus was and what Jesus had done for him.

The same is true in our spiritual deafness. Sometimes we don't speak clearly about God because we haven't heard the Word of God clearly. We become frustrated and look for solutions in new methods or gimmicks. But, when you children are in a Sunday School class; when you adults are in a Bible Study Class; and when we are all here in Divine Worship – God's Word will open our ears to hear clearly and we will then, by the same power of God's Word, be able to speak it clearly as well – to our family, to our friends, and to anyone with whom we have contact – about who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

We have truly been blessed by God. Our hearts are born closed and we are spiritually deaf because of sin. Jesus takes that sin upon Himself and offers Himself as the sacrifice in payment for that sin. He rises from death to life to do away with the penalty for sin – namely, death. Now, He speaks the word of Good News about that to us and, through that, opens our hearts to hear, our minds to understand, and our spirits to believe and receive what He has done for us. He loosens our tongues that we might sing His praise and declare His mighty and merciful works, not only to our children in Sunday School, but to our adults and all who are outside our fellowship. Your ears are open and you have heard. Now go and tell! Amen.