

Opening Up While Shutting Down

Mark 7:31-37

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 5) 2021

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Mark introduces us to a man who suffered from both lack of hearing and a serious speech impediment. His life was anything but easy. No one knew quite what to do with him. Apparently, he hadn't heard the morning birds or the evening crickets since the day he was born. He stuttered every time he tried to say even the simplest thing.

But Jesus knew what to do with this fellow. He first took the man aside from the crowd that had brought him. Then he poked his finger right in toward the eardrum of the man. But this poking was only half of it. Jesus spit on the man's tongue and pulled his finger out of the ear long enough to massage the tongue. Then, in what must have seemed to everyone in the vicinity like primal behavior, he GRUNTED! Jesus groaned deeply. He looked up toward heaven as he spoke toward the man: "Ephatha!" Which means, "Be Opened!"

And the man could suddenly hear. His tongue became free enough to whistle. Now he could talk as plainly as all those gawkers who had made a life out of talking about him. Every speech therapist who had worked with the guy since second grade were now speechless.

I know the saliva deal is a bit repulsive. But evidently that's exactly what was required. And lest it offend any of us too much, let's not forget those times

when mother licked her fingers and wiped all that chocolate goo from around our mouths when we were little.

Jesus mysteriously stared up at the sky while massaging the tongue and the ears of this distressed man. I've always wondered why. My guess is that maybe God was reminding Jesus that he should be ready for bystanders there to get a whole lot more excited about the physical miracle than the spiritual miracle of healing. In other words, "Get ready, Jesus, for the people to be much more infatuated by the spit and the ear poke than by the change that will be wrought in this man's spirit and attitude."

When you come right down to it, spiritual miracles seem to delight God much more than physical ones. Physical miracles were always relatively easy for Jesus. Or so it seemed. He had an easier time getting a paralyzed man up on his feet and walking, for example, than he did getting the same man to believe his sins were forgiven. Spiritual miracles are the big challenge for Jesus. They're the tough ones.

Which brings me to asking you some spiritual questions: where does this story engage your life? Here is a story about Jesus opening us up while we're in the middle of shutting down, again. So how are you deafened to the good news of Jesus? How are we oblivious to what God is doing around us, around you? What are the ways that the noise in our discombobulated world around us have deafened us to hearing what God might want to say to us? We're all glued to our televisions and devices, keeping up with the latest on social media or using our devices and social media to distract us from the horrific world around us. We're angry and depressed and afraid and all of this deafens us to the word God might want to say to us.

Can you be opened to hearing? As you know and we have talked about this a lot, but in times of chaos and change, we tend to retreat to what we perceive as secure and stable. Our country, our state, and our town are all changing – changing demographics and changing population, and instead of building walls against change and passing new laws of restriction and suppression, will you be open to God so that you might hear in new ways? Rather than work on recovering how it used to be, what if we opened up to discovering what new future God has in front of us?

But more: how are you tongue-tied in talking about God?

There are many of us who were traumatized as kids and young people by bad religion, angry preachers, manipulative church people, overbearing parents, Fundamentalist religion, immorality, dishonesty, abuse, and on and on in church. The result is that we've become tongue-tied about talking about God and Jesus. We'll talk endlessly and perhaps even eloquently about any number of other things but can't or won't say a word about Jesus.

We've seen God-talk abused and we can't get away from it. Sometimes we feel like Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* at Radio City Music Hall watching the Christmas show with the Rockettes and thousands of actors carrying crucifixes all over the place, with the lights and music all over the top. Caulfield said, "Old Jesus probably would have puked if He could see it." That's how we feel hearing so much of the God-chatter around us. No wonder we don't say a word about God.

And it's not simply that we are reticent because of the God-chatter but also because we fear that we don't know what to say.

Lynna Williams has a great short story called “Personal Testimony,” about a twelve-year-old preacher’s daughter at a Southern Baptist church camp (Falls Creek in Oklahoma) who earns hundreds of dollars running “a ghost-writing business for Jesus,” in which she composes for other campers the personal testimonies of conversion and repentance they are expected to give at each evening’s brush arbor worship service. The story plays off the anxiety that we lack the words to describe our faith in public so we need someone else to create the language for us.

Often, even the most sincere among us, feel the need to get our beliefs straightened out ahead of time before we open up our mouths. When we speak about our faith we think that what we are doing is finding the words to say what we already believe.

But the truth is, saying things out loud is part of how we come to believe. We talk our way toward belief. Talking to God and about God, out loud is part of knowing God. We participate in God by talking.

Do you remember the quip by old comedian Flip Wilson who used to tell people that he was a “Jehovah’s Bystander.” He said, “They wanted me to become a Jehovah’s Witness, but I don’t want to get involved.”

Well, talking the faith is one of the ways we get involved. We come to know God and know what we believe by saying it. Those of you who have taught Sunday School tell me this all the time. You tell me that you learn more by teaching than you ever did by being a student. At the same time, what’s terrific about good Bible study groups is that the conversation, dialogue, expressing yourself, and asking questions is all part of putting ideas into words that helps us

know and understand Scripture. When we talk about our faith, we are not merely expressing our beliefs; we are coming more fully and clearly to believe. As Tom Long says, “We are always talking ourselves into being Christian” (from *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*).

Like the man in our story, we hear something from God, perhaps we’re not even sure what we hear. But we talk about it. We talk with one another and make sense of it, in church, in Bible study, over coffee, and maybe even when someone asks us at work, “Why are you Austin Heights’ people different? Is it because you’re a bunch of Democrats?” And you respond, “It has nothing to do with being Democrats. It has to do with Jesus.”

Dorothy Day, one of the greatest Christians of the 20th century said, “If I have achieved anything in my life, it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God.”

Day was the founder of the Catholic Worker movement. Back during the Depression in the 1930’s, she began providing shelter for the homeless in what came to be known as Catholic Worker houses in Chicago. When she described what led her to Christ and to her sense of calling, she remembered an experience when she was a little girl. She went next door to see her best friend and found the door to the apt. open, so she went in. She saw that the breakfast dishes had been washed and stacked beside the sink, and then she discovered her friend’s mom, kneeling on the floor saying her prayers. When the mom heard Dorothy come in, she stopped praying long enough to tell her that her friend had gone to the store, then she returned to her prayers. Years later, Dorothy remembered, “I felt a burst of love toward her that I’ve never forgotten.”

One of Day's biographers wrote that this encounter with the friend's mom saying her morning prayers was "one of the early moments that she felt a first encounter with the transcendent. This sense that there was more to life became an irresistible call beckoning her and ultimately leading her into the Church" (from Tom Long, *Testimony*, p. 81).

Dorothy Day "overheard" the natural and authentic words of faith and prayer from an important adult in her life and she never got over it.

My hope and prayer for you is that faith in Christ, knowing God, becomes so real and natural that you can pray without pretense and talk about God and Jesus naturally and openly – even while shutting down.

This old world hears plenty of anger and outrage, accusation and counteraccusation. I'm not urging us to be simply nice or polite or pollyannish. I'm urging us to listen and speak like Jesus. To listen and speak the good news, the Gospel – of justice and peace, of mercy and grace, of goodness and love. This old world needs such news.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.