

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Be Opened

Mark 7

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The scripture readings this week place a lot of emphasis on “opening.” The prophet Isaiah describes a time when “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.” The Psalmist praises the Lord who executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, and “opens the eyes of the blind.” And St. Mark describes Jesus placing his fingers in a deaf man’s ears and saying, “Be opened.” Deep calls to deep says the Psalmist. The depth of Jesus’ life is calls to the depths of our condition as humans.

And so, rightly, today we celebrate baptism. This is a happy day. Baptisms are celebrations for the ones who are being baptized. It also can be an occasion of renewal for all of those who have already been baptized. Each time we gather around the baptistry, we bear witness to God’s grace in our own lives and our life together. We remember our baptisms, renew our faith, and confess our belief in the resurrection, the grace of God, and our salvation in Christ.

In some traditions, there is a line spoken at baptism that goes something like this, “The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak, may he so touch your ears to hear the word and your lips to proclaim the Faith.” This, too, is a baptismal prayer today for each of us: May the Lord Jesus touch our ears to hear the word and our lips to proclaim the faith.

Today’s gospel passage gives the origin of this blessing. A crowd of people brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech. Jesus used outward signs: matter and physical objects as a means to give inward grace. He touched the man’s ears with his fingers and his tongue, he spoke words, and he healed the man. In the gospels Jesus healed many people. This healing in particular is incarnational and physical. There is touch. This healing in particular is also spiritual and holistic. It is about more than ears that are stopped and a tongue that doesn’t function. Jesus healed the man sacramentally: *outward signs and inward reality.*

Just as this person’s condition has symbolic value, so does the means of the healing. The act of healing itself was accomplished with a word of liberation addressed not to the defective auditory organs but to the man himself and to the heart from which hearing and speech derive. Jesus looked to heaven, sighed, and said: *ephphatha*: be opened.

Jesus doesn’t merely give the command: “Hear,” or “Speak,” or “Be healed.” But he says, “Be opened.” Open our ears, open our hearts, open our capacity to listen and speak the words of life.

The baptismal blessing is indeed a prayer for all of us, “May the Lord open your ears to hear the word.” Our inability to hear the Word is hardly a function of ears but of mind and of

heart. Our condition as humans, particularly in the time we live in echoes the condition of deafness. Some people are in need of the gift of healing in our ability to hear—many of us as we grow older, but more so more of us, more of the time, it's not our inability to hear, but our capacity to listen. To put it simply: there's a difference between hearing and listening. Every married couple knows this of one another. Every teacher in the classroom knows this of the students. Just because words go in one ear doesn't mean they don't just spill out the other.

To listen well is to be open to the one who is speaking. To do this we must learn to slow down and to be present. Jesus took the man away from the crowds for this healing. There's wisdom here. To get away from the noise of the crowds so that our ears and our hearts find the silence necessary to be able to truly listen. This getting away for us can take the shape of a retreat or a practice centering prayer, these are both beautiful things; it can also simply mean not turning to social media when there's a lull in the day or in a conversation. Rather, just be. Slow down. Be present. Our practice of brief silence in Sunday morning worship nods to the practice of silence as a spiritual practice for all of our lives, which helps us learn to listen.

Listening for the good word of God is first letting the word penetrate through the noise and mindless chatter that's around us, and let us confess, also within us. When we pause to pray it can seem like a circus erupts in our heads. Ever had that experience? Thomas Merton was keen to this even back in the 1950s and 60s. The outward noise of all that's around us and the inner noise that he said just erupts in him whenever he closes his eyes and tries to come into prayer. He noticed how these are connected—how our eyes and ears were bombarded all the time with messages largely to buy and consume and be distracted. That was then--how much more now?

When we were driving in the UK this summer, I asked the family. Do you notice what's different about this road? Uh, the steering wheel is on the right? They said. Yes, but that's not it. You're driving on the left-hand side of the road. Well ya, but that's not it either. Uh, you're gripping the steering wheel like you're choking the life out of it. Definitely true—terrifying. It was scary. No look, pay attention. There are no billboards. For miles and miles, no ads in our eyes. Just trees and open spaces and a culture that apparently didn't think it necessary to be confronted every moment with a wall of visual and auditory noise.

Maybe Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears for a moment out of knowledge for what the man was about to hear when he could actually hear—the noise of the crowd for the first time in his life, and he would never again have silence so simple. May you never get so used to noise you can't distinguish between all the words and the Word.

Being opened is cultivating the capacity to listen which comes through practicing silence. Listening also is about the practice of openness to other people, and what they may have to offer as unique beloved children of God and sometimes unlikely teachers. This, too, is a spiritual discipline that has more to do with our hearts than just our ears. Listening is especially hard when what you hear and who you hear it from isn't just a matter of distraction, but makes your stomach knot up and your hands ball up in anger.

I know a pastor who challenged his congregation to be curious about why people think and see things the way they do when they're different from the ways you see them and think about the way things are. Acknowledging what is sure to be a tense election season for his congregation, he said, "I have a secret for you. You are with people who will vote differently from you. Try to have the courage to ask why and let them tell you. You don't have to agree with them. That is not required." Like Ted Lasso's *be curious, not judgmental*, the pastor encouraged them to wonder what they see that you don't see, what they feel or fear or hope, that you simply don't understand. *Be interested*. Mark, who is typically judicious with his words, describes in some geographic detail when Jesus is outside of his normal home turf. This is one of those times. He's with the other. And heals the other. And is willing to listen to the other. We don't have to go so far to find the other side of an issue or a politic. Unless you've totally sealed yourself off into a bubble, it's often right next to you. Even if you have totally sealed yourself off in a bubble, it's right next to you--you just don't know it.

I think most people find this posture to the other to be deeply vulnerable and deeply uncomfortable. We definitely won't see a posture of listening or generosity on display from candidates nor from their surrogates nor from those who promote them or destroy the other or yell about them on TV. But they don't get to tell us how to live in the world. They don't get to dictate how Christians live with one another. They don't get to make us close our ears and retreat into echo chambers of spewing hot lava. We are people of Jesus-- Jesus who transcended boundaries and saw the humanity in people who are different. To be people of Jesus is to have his fingers on our ears, and his fingers on our lips and on our hearts. We are protagonists of *ephphatha*. Truth is, we probably could all use some divine intervention and healing in this area in these days. To learn when not to listen and when to listen deeply and openly.

Divine intervention is on order today, divine healing, sacramental transformation. It's a baptism day. A day when we remember that are made people who worship God, the Spirit, who hovered over the waters of creation, whose power parted the Red Sea, and who sanctifies the baptismal water. We worship God, the Son, who didn't just speak the good word but who is the living Word of God made flesh. Like St. Paul, our speech doesn't depend on eloquence or human wisdom, but on the message of Christ crucified in our hearing and our speaking and in our living. We worship God, the Father, who sent his son so that all who believe in him would have eternal life, his son of whom he said at the Transfiguration, "This is my beloved son, listen to him."

May God give us ears to hear and a tongue to speak the good news: truth that sets us free, words of grace that heal the broken heart, the good news of healing and hope that comes as we are opened by God's mercy more and more to God's mysterious, wonderful, healing Gospel in the Word made flesh. He who walks among us even now, is present to us even now, and whose words are in our souls, even this day. Thanks be to God. Amen.