

Be Opened

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 13, 2024
Text: Mark 7:31-37

Today's text from Mark tells us the story of the only time Jesus healed a deaf person. There are multiple stories of Jesus healing general illness and infirmity and a few about him healing blindness as well as demoniacs. But this is the only detailed story about his encounter with and healing of a deaf man who was also mute, unable to speak. Noteworthy is that this healing takes place shortly after the healing of the Syrophoenician woman's ill daughter. You remember that story – it's the one where Jesus called her daughter a dog. Yikes! That happened in Tyre and now Jesus is in route to the region next to the Sea of Galilee. Apparently, the local townspeople realized he was traveling through the area so they brought this deaf man to him for healing. This is how the encounter between the deaf man and Jesus took place. And I have questions.

First, what was there about this man who couldn't speak because he couldn't hear that caused him to have people so concerned about his welfare that they took the time to bring him to Jesus in the first place. Was it just that he was someone's brother or son? Or was this a group of friends who cared enough to find help for him? We don't know. The text doesn't say. It is curious in that in Jesus' time, a disability such as deafness that someone was born with would be regarded as God's intended punishment for the sins of his parents or grandparents. Or were these folks not even Jewish to begin with? Again, we don't know. But I think it's something worth considering. Who was this deaf man, really, and why was this particular encounter – the only time

Jesus heals a deaf-mute that we know of – considered important enough to include in the oral tradition Mark’s Gospel is built on? This is an important question for all the healing and miracle stories of Jesus and a good reminder that not all questions have answers. But, still, it’s worth thinking about.

One of the ways to reflect on a Scripture text such as this is to try to get playful with it – to “dance with the text” as my mentor and biblical scholar Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza teaches. That means, you look for ways to expand the text beyond the words on the page. How do we do that? One way is to imagine the back story of the deaf-mute man who one day finds himself before Jesus. Who might he have been? Who cared enough about him to bring him to Jesus? Or, did he have to beg and plead for someone to help him get there? Better yet, did this deaf-mute man have his own unique way of gleaning information about things and he found out about Jesus by himself and took himself to meet Jesus? The text does say that “they” brought him to Jesus but who is “they?” His friends or family? The disciples after they encountered him coming toward Jesus on his own? We don’t know. What do *you* think? That is not a rhetorical question! I really am asking what you think!!

So, the deaf-mute man is now face to face with Jesus and “they” are begging Jesus to heal him. Again, who is “they?” The disciples who found him wondering and see an opportunity for Jesus to do another miraculous healing? Or is it the man’s friends or family? We don’t know but think about what the difference is to the text depending on who we identify as the “they!” This is what I love about bible study! And, by the way, by working through this text with me like this, you are actually doing something called “exegesis.” That’s just a fancy word for trying to figure out what the text means. This question of thinking more deeply about who

“they” is in this text is a genuine exegetical exercise because how we answer the question will influence how we think about Jesus – and that’s the whole point of these stories in the first place. Let me explain. If “they” is the family and/or friends of the man, that tells us something about the man – he was loved by others – and about the friends and family – they loved him so much they wanted to see him healed so he could live the best life possible. But, the sense of this story is very different if “they” is the disciples themselves who just happened to run into this guy, who may or may not have been looking for healing from Jesus, and it’s them bringing him to Jesus and begging Jesus to heal him. Why? Not because they love the guy. They don’t even know him. It’s possible they had learned from Jesus about the importance of caring about everyone who was suffering and that prompted them to bring him forward for healing. Or did some of them see something in this potential healing that would benefit the movement itself? Yet another story of Jesus’ healing an impossible case? Interesting, right?????

But how do we know which is the more accurate interpretation of the text? We don’t. We never can, despite what some more conservative churches and pastors will want to tell you about what the bible says and what it means in the words it contains. However, we can make some guesses with what we do know and the possibilities our questions of the text open up for us. We find more clues in the rest of the text to accomplish this. Again, it’s interesting to me that in this text it is clearly stated that Jesus took the man away from the crowd, somewhere more private, for the healing. If we think about the other healing stories we know, this is a little unusual. Was Jesus unsure he could heal the man? Or did he know what he would need to do – putting his fingers into the man’s ears and then on his tongue, spitting in

between the two – was a little gross for others to witness and he wanted to spare the man some embarrassment. Again, we don't know. But, by taking the time to notice these little details, even to question them, the story becomes more real. These are not just words on a page anymore. They have become a living story about someone's life being changed forever by Jesus. It's sort of like the difference between watching a movie on television or in a regular theatre – exciting but definitely the story is being told on a flat surface. Or watching it in I-max where it feels like the people are stepping out of the screen and right into your life. That's what dancing with the scriptures does! It makes the story alive in a whole new way.

So, let's look at how the story ends. This is always the best part of any story, right? Jesus has put his fingers in the man's ears and on the man's tongue, spitting in between the two. We could go down a whole rabbit hole on the spitting thing, but we're not going to do that although I'm fairly confident there is at least one exegetical seminary paper written on precisely that. Still not that significant to us. What I want us to look at is what Jesus does after touching the man. Jesus does three things: 1) he looks up to heaven (he does this a lot when he's about to do something amazing); 2) he sighs (this is very unusual!) and 3) he says to the man, "*Ephphatha*" which is Aramaic for "Be opened!" And what happens next to the man? Mark tells us, "Immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released and he spoke plainly." There is a lot here to take note of but what stands out most to me is this pattern of three. Jesus does three things and then three things happen to the man as he is healed. Three actions which result in a totally new life for the man who has been healed. Remind you of anything? Well, it reminds me of Jesus' time in the tomb and his resurrection from death on the third day. Three.

Three. This is a reminder to us that these stories in the Gospels, though written as though they are diary records being recorded as they occurred, they are not. They were written down literally decades after the stories in them took place. This fact is significant for a lot of reasons, but for our purposes today I want us to note that when these were written down, the writer already knew the ending of the entire story. The writer already knew that Jesus would be crucified, buried and then walk out of the tomb three days later. So, these stories in all the Gospels are filled with echoes of how the story of Jesus ends. And this is one of those echoes. Cool, right? It's all about dancing with the scripture texts and letting the layers of meaning float to the surface as we dare to ask questions of the words on the page.

Dear ones, this exercise of dancing with the text as we have just done is how we discern the ever-changing insights that are always waiting in the bible for us. It is how we make meaning of the texts and how that in turn assists us in the on-going work of making meaning of our own lives in the light of the living presence of the Holy Spirit within us, when we remember to give it our awareness. To me, that is the primary meaning of those words Jesus says in this text when he heals the deaf-mute – “*Ephphatha*” – be opened. Be opened. This story reminds us that we need always to be aware of whether or not we are open to God's leading us in the moments of life. God is always present, yes. Jesus is always with us, yes. The Holy Spirit dwells within us, yes. But the funny thing is, all that only functions within us when we make space for it. We need to make room in our hearts and in our minds for the Holy Spirit to dance through our lives. We need to allow Jesus to enter our thinking all the time, not just when it's convenient. Not just when we're in church or even when we say grace at mealtime or prayers in the doctor's waiting room waiting

for test results. We need to bring God's presence into the realities of life every day. This is the central message of the Christian faith and one that often disappears or gets squeezed out by all the busy, scary, frantic, hectic moments of life. Another way to think about this is to notice all the ways we compartmentalize our lives without even thinking about it. Let me explain.

Most of us still working have a work life box. If we're retired that box is now filled with all the stuff we do in retirement we couldn't do while we were working. We also have a family box and a friend's box. Hopefully we have something that I would call the "taking care of me" box and finally we have a dealing with the world box (this is where all my trials and tribulations with "bridge-mageddon" would belong in my life, for example). Okay, you with me so far? Our lives are essentially a set of building blocks, each of which holds a different part of our life. The way we put those individual building blocks together changes each day because life unfolds differently each day, depending on hundreds of little things we can't control – like the weather, like changing schedules due to doctor's appointments, sudden medical issues for us or a loved one, etc. You get the picture? So, here's my question for you as you think about all the component parts of your life – all those boxes or compartments that are stuffed full of all the things that make up you and your life each day: Where is God in all that?

Perhaps an even better way to think about it – how do you leave room for God in all that? Or do you? That is a real question, dear ones. And that's where the encouragement we find from Jesus himself in this story becomes so important – *Ephphatha!* Be open! Dear ones, make the effort to be open to notice God's abiding presence in your life! Listen to that little voice in your head that encourages you to be kind to a stranger. Pay attention to

those moments when it feels like you're missing something important because you probably are – Jesus knocking on the door of your heart like that beloved picture! Think deeply about how you – yes YOU – can bring Jesus to life in the lives of friends and strangers alike just by living the faith you profess. Or, put another way, take your faith out of the “Sunday is for God” box and then get rid of that particular box altogether so that God is free to dance through every corner of your life! I promise you will be amazed at what a difference this makes.

Of course, as we all know too well, nothing worth doing is ever easy or simple. Opening your life to let the Holy Spirit choreograph it is scary, at least at first. But it doesn't need to be. Basically, it just means to live as best as you can the way Jesus would expect. Do unto others as you would have done to you. Be kind. Be caring. Be present to others and their pain and confusion and fear. Be kind to yourself when things feel like they are too much and take some quiet time apart from stuff. Jesus did this regularly! There is another thing Jesus was always doing that is buried in layers of words in the Gospels but it's still there – Jesus was in the moment but also thinking about the future. Jesus was fully present to every person which came before him, like the deaf-mute man, but he also always had his eye looking to where he intended to go and what he intended to do. He knew what God needed him to do and accomplish with his life, and he knew how important it was. He lived in the moment with an eye to the future and, this dear ones, is what we must do too. Invite God into every corner of your life and don't be afraid of or surprised by what happens as a result. With God, all things are possible! We are all living proof of that! Amen.