

HEARING AND SPEAKING THE FAITH
Mark 7:31-37; Trinity 12; August 21-22, 2021

One of the ways that you can tell if something is important to people is how much time they are willing to invest in it, including the time spent talking about what is important to them. For example, sports fans spend many hours and days participating or watching, and then just as much or more time talking about what happened. Stories of key games or plays are recounted and retold decades after they occurred. If something is important to us, we love talking about it and we don't want anyone to cut us off.

That appears to be the case in the man who was deaf and could not speak, whom Jesus healed so he could hear and speak plainly. Even though Jesus charged those who witnessed this not to tell anyone what He had done, they more fervently told others what God had done for the man. Why Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone at that time about His healing is a question for another time, but God wants this miracle to be known now since the Holy Spirit inspired Mark to include it in his Gospel. God's will is clear for us: what Jesus did for this man and what He has done for us should zealously be proclaimed to all who are willing to hear and to those who don't want to hear it.

One of the ways we can tell that something is important to the faith and life of the Church is how many words and actions are used in our rituals, such as the liturgies of the Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The more important something is the more extensive the rituals surrounding it often become.

By the time of the Lutheran Reformation the order for Holy Baptism was quite long and complicated, easily twice as long as the order found in our current hymnbook. One of the first things Luther did in those days was translate rites from Latin, which many people in the Church did not understand, into German. He did this with the order of Holy Baptism in 1523 (*LW* 53:95f.). Luther's general rule for liturgy was to keep everything that was in harmony with God's Word but cut out everything contrary to the Gospel. The traditional order of Baptism that existed included a quote from today's Gospel from Mark seven: **Ephphatha, that is, "Be opened,"** along with the ritual action of putting spit on a finger and touching the ears.

This reflects how Jesus had healed the deaf man who could not speak clearly. **And taking [the man] aside from the crowd privately, [Jesus] 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.** This miracle, which appears only in Mark, was understood as something that applied to every Baptism so that the pastor baptizing repeated Jesus’ words and actions. What can we learn about our Baptisms from this miracle?

Let’s review first what happened then. Since the man could not hear, it is likely that he had no idea what was going on when others brought him to Jesus. All he knew is that he was the center of the crowd’s attention. Jesus took him aside privately and by His actions showed the man what He was going to do for him, since the man could not hear. Jesus put His fingers in the deaf man’s ears to show him that this had to do with hearing. He touched his tongue to show him this was about speaking. Jesus looked up into heaven to show that man that God was the One working here. Jesus sighed and spoke the Aramaic word, **“Ephphatha,”** which means, **“Be opened”** – referring to the man’s ears and tongue – with which the man now heard and was able to speak rightly. Jesus showed the man by His actions what He was going to do since the man could not hear, and then Jesus did it.

How does this apply to us in Baptism?

When we come to be baptized we are like that man who could not hear, even if we have perfect hearing. What we are deaf to is the hearing of God’s Word. Until we hear the Word of God we are as good as deaf in our unbelief. God’s Word is life-giving and creating. Without the hearing of that Word we are as good as dead. But coming to Baptism without the ability to hear does not prevent God from working faith and life in us. What God does in Holy Baptism is pure gift, a gracious washing away of sin and giving of new life in Jesus. Baptism depends entirely on what God does, not what we can do. This miracle emphasizes that point. The deaf man had no idea who Jesus was until Jesus showed him what He was about to do for him and then did it. Jesus opened his ears to hear, and what he heard was God’s Word in Christ. He went from deaf to hearing, unbelief to believing.

God opens our ears in Baptism to hear His Word and have faith in Him. And this is none of our doing, as Luther's *Catechism* reminds us. "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." But our inability to hear and believe God's Word does not prevent God from having the ability to open our ears to hear in Baptism. The Holy Spirit calls to us, speaks to us, the Word of Christ that heals our unbelieving deafness so we can hear the Good News of Jesus. He cleanses us from all sin, and we begin a new life as children of God hearing God's Word of salvation in Jesus Christ. The old rite of Holy Baptism taught this by including the Word and actions of Jesus: "**Ephphatha,**" that is, "**Be opened.**"

Being able to hear God's Word in faith leads to speaking God's Word in faith. Jesus put spittle on His finger and touched the man's tongue to show that He was giving him the ability to speak. After the deaf man received hearing from Jesus he couldn't stop speaking his faith in Jesus to those around him, which he was able to do clearly or rightly. This also happens to us in Holy Baptism. The Word of Christ we hear we then speak in faith to those around us. This happens in church when we worship and in the world where we live.

In Church we are constantly hearing God's Word throughout the liturgy and preaching. Hearing it in faith we are given then many opportunities to respond in words and songs to those around us. This is why we don't waste our time in church with words and songs that are secular, that aren't God's Word. We have plenty of opportunity to speak the world's words in our daily lives, though careful not to abase and slander our God through sinful words and actions. In church we hear and learn God's Word in faith and practice speaking it to each other.

Not everyone is a very good reader or speaker. This is one reason why the Church uses liturgies that are repeated. Even if you cannot read well, or at all, if you listen to those around you, you can learn the words through repetition and confess your faith with those around you. If you lose your ability to see and read, we don't want to exclude you from speaking your faith so we keep using liturgies familiar to you.

Churches that change their liturgy all the time so that you have to be able to read to participate intentionally exclude from participation the very young, the handicapped, the illiterate and semi-illiterate. That is a very unloving thing to do.

When people are given faith in Jesus, they want to speak God's Word to everyone around them, like the man Jesus healed and the crowd who witnessed it kept doing. This leads me to wonder why, when some people attend worship they don't participate by speaking and singing the liturgy and hymns, which are essentially God's Word. If you have a hearing handicap that would make that very difficult for you to do, but if you can hear and speak when you are out in the world, why won't you in church? I've met many people who, when you ask them about something they are interested in, you can't shut them up. But when they are in church it is as if their lips are super-glued together and they won't utter a peep. These are often the same people who, when you ask what their faith is, struggle to put it into words because they haven't practiced speaking their faith when in church.

Christians need to speak their faith, not only in church with other believers, but in the world so others can hear and believe. We are living in a world that is increasingly hostile to Christians speaking their faith. Jesus told us that we should expect this. If Jesus' enemies refused to listen to Him then, they will not want to listen to Christians speaking His Word today. They killed Jesus to shut Him up, but He rose from the dead to keep speaking in the world forever. Jesus has given us the ability to hear His Word so we can believe and be saved. And Jesus has given us the ability to speak His Word, not only in worship here in church but everywhere in the world. He even gives us the very words to say to others, as we confessed earlier with Peter. **"You [Jesus] have the words of eternal life"** (Jn 6:68).

Our current baptismal liturgy no longer includes **"Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened,"** with spit on fingers, or salt on the tongue and anointing with oil, but Jesus still does a miracle of opening our ears to hear Him speaking to us and loosing our tongues so we can rightly and plainly speak His Word. Lord, keep our ears open to hear Your Word and our tongues loosened to rightly speak Your Word here and in all areas of our lives. Amen.