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GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

“Your ‘Ephphatha’ Moment”

Mark 7:32-35

Rev. David K. Groth

“... Some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, ‘Ephphatha!’ (which means, ‘Be opened!’). At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly” (Mark 7:32-35).

September 9, 2012

Collect of the Day

O Lord, let Your merciful ears be open to the prayers of Your humble servants and grant that what they ask may be in accord with Your gracious will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus touched people as he healed them? Looking through the Gospel according to Mark, there's Simon's mother-in-law in chapter 1: "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her" (v. 31). There's the leper, also in chapter 1: "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, 'be clean'" (v. 41). Jairus's daughter in chapter 5; "Taking her by the hand he said to her, 'Talitha cumi,' which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, get up.'" (v. 41). Touch was an important part of his healing ministry.

I asked one of our members, Dr. Carrie Narkis, if touching patients was ever discussed in medical school. She wrote, "I had a very smart attending physician tell me in medical school to ALWAYS touch the patient. In this time of medicine, with diagnostic tests such as labs and x-rays, it oftentimes does not seem like it is always necessary to touch a patient." But then she said, statistically, "a diagnosis is still at least twice as likely when a patient is examined" (twice as likely when a patient is touched). She continues, "Studies have shown improved patient outcomes with touch being as simple as taking a pulse." It's not so much about the pulse; it's the touching that makes the patient feel comfortable with the doctor and more communicative about their symptoms, and "breaks down the barriers between the patient and the doctor." Dr. Narkis admitted, "Sometimes when I have been running late or have 5 billion other things to do I have not touched or examined a patient, usually with negative results or the need for another visit. Therefore, I try my best to at least do some examination even if I don't feel it is necessary." Touch is an important part of healing.

Bonnie Zabel who was the administrator of Marquardt Memorial Manor told me that senior citizens in nursing homes experience less and less touch, so in that environment she encouraged the nurses and CNAs to touch

The Lord's Supper is another "Ephphatha" moment. In it Jesus invades your space and touches your tongue with his own body and blood. He puts forgiveness into your mouth and opens your ears again to hear his Word of pardon and peace. In the first century Ignatius of Antioch called the Lord's Supper a "medicine of immortality and an antidote to death." And we can believe that too because where there is forgiveness, there is life and salvation. See what the Good Physician can do when he touches us!

"Ephphatha!" "Open up!" One word is all it took, and the ears of the deaf were unstopped and the mute tongue shouted for joy. One ordinary word. Maybe it's the word God is quietly whispering today, to hearts that are rigid and cold, to lips reluctant to praise, and tongues slow to confess, "Ephphatha!" "Open up! Let loose!" Maybe it's the same word God will use again one day, shouting it out over a field of granite grave markers. "Ephphatah!" Open up. Maybe it's the word we'll hear him say as we stand before the gates of heaven, "Ephphatha!"

The Good Physician has touched you and he has healed you of sin and death, and has untied your tongue to confess him as Lord. With that crowd from 2000 years ago, we too can say "he has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." Thanks be to God. Amen.

when appropriate. Bonnie said "It sends the signal that you have personal worth . . . that you have value . . . that somebody cares."

Of course there are boundaries, important boundaries. If touch is for your own benefit, it's inappropriate. And caregivers also have to consider the unintended messages. I remember a District President often telling us, "Arm's length, gentlemen. Arm's length." And we all knew what he meant. It's commonly understood that teachers don't initiate hugs, but they can return hugs, unless you're a male. Then it's best to just pat the hugging child on the back. Today that's best practice, but I can't help but think something important has been lost.

One day a man was brought to Jesus who is deaf and whose deafness causes such speech impediments that he is mostly unintelligible. And Jesus touches him . . . a lot. First, Jesus leads him aside, away from the crowd. Then, slowly reaching out his hands Jesus puts his fingers into the man's ears, an action which conveys Jesus understands he is deaf and intends to do something about it. Then Jesus spits lightly on his fingers, and touches the man's tongue. He understands the man cannot speak, and intends to do something about that too. Why the spittle? I know Jesus didn't need to use spittle, so it's probably about the needs of the man who was deaf. Perhaps he needed something visible to cling to, as a way of remembering, and communicating how this healing came about. And remember, this is in the day when saliva was not thought to be full of germs. In any event, there's a lot of personal touch going on here with the ears and the tongue.

I remember I had a hair-cut in Germany, and, at the end, to my astonishment the fellow took a wet paper towel and with his pinkie fingers bore into my ears as far as they would go. My brothers used to pin me down and do things like that to me. I think they called it "a wet willy", but no adult had ever done that. I don't know if that's standard for hair cuts in Germany, or if it was just this fellow's unique signature, or maybe he was simply taking care of loose bits of hair. Either way, I can attest, it's very personal space.

After touching that man's ears and his tongue, Jesus looks up to heaven. Watching him do this, the man knows that what is about to happen comes from above. God is

about to do something for him. Then a heavy sigh or groan, deep exhaling of breath. It's sad and sympathetic, half sigh and half prayer. Anyone who has ever walked through the intensive care unit of Children's Hospital knows what kind of sigh this is. It says the world just isn't supposed to be this way. This is not how God created things. This is not God's will for us. It's the very same word used in Romans 8: "The whole creation groans inwardly" as it waits for redemption.

In any event, Jesus has touched his ears and has touched his tongue and has sighed a deep, prayerful sigh or groan. I picture Jesus with his hands on the man's shoulders now and he looks up to heaven and utters one word. Mark wants us to know the syllables and sounds that came from Jesus' lips: "Ephphathah." It's an Aramaic imperative which means "Open up!" One simple word. But when you take a word like that and put the power and authority of God behind it, the word with a small w becomes a word with a big W. "Ephphathah!" When Jesus speaks like this, things happen . . . immediately, no lag time. In fact, I suspect "Ephphathah" was the first word this man ever heard. Mark writes, "his tongue was [also] released and he spoke plainly." Literally, the Greek says his tongue was "untied", and we know what that means because we often say we're tongue-tied.

"Ephphatha." One ordinary word, but when God's power and authority and grace are behind ordinary words, remarkable things happen. It makes me think of "Let there be light" and before the period is on that sentence there is dazzling light. It makes me think of when Jesus said "Lazarus, come forth!" or when he said to the raging sea "Quiet! Be still!" or when he said with a cup of wine in his hands, "This is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." When God puts his authority and will and grace behind ordinary words, then remarkable things happen.

In any event, Jesus and the man return to the crowd, and it's clear to them the man is no longer deaf or mute, and they can't help but say of Jesus, "He does everything well." It makes one think of Genesis 1, "God saw all that he had made and behold, it was very good" (v. 31). At least, that's the way it was in the beginning: very good, until we mostly ruined it with our sin and rebellion. So now there are cemeteries and oil spills and E-Coli and disappearing species and there's blindness and deafness and paralysis and bodies

ruined by war . . . or age, and the whole creation groans. But the Savior also groans as he makes it right again. He groans before healing this man, reversing a small part of the fall in this man's life. And he groans also from the cross reversing the effects of the fall in a big way, taking the teeth out of the maw of death. Whether pressing his fingers into a man's ears or bleeding out onto ruined soil as the Lamb of God, the Savior is making it right again.

Seven hundred years before Christ, Isaiah said watch for the marks of the Savior. This is how you will recognize him. "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy."

Jesus says "Ephthatah" and a heavy tongue starts shouting for joy. It's a small miracle really, but it's a small miracle which points to one much greater. Some are born physically deaf and mute. All are born spiritually deaf and mute . . . until God touches and heals us. If God doesn't open our ears, we cannot hear the Word of God. Paul wrote, "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." That is, we need God to invade our personal space. We need God to touch us. We need the Good Physician to bore those fingers into our ears, and touch our tongues and look up to heaven with a groan and say "Ephphatha!"

In the early Latin Church, "Ephphatha!" was said as part of the baptismal liturgy. That is, the priest would press his fingers into ears of the baby and then place one into the baby's mouth and say the word, "Ephphatha!" . . . "open up!" Maybe the baby screamed; maybe the baby slept, maybe the baby started sucking on the priest's finger. No matter. It's the Lord who is doing the work in Baptism. It is the Lord who is unstopping little ears to the Word and opening up little hearts liberating little tongues to confess one day what the heart already knows: Jesus is Lord. Baptism is your "Ephphatha" moment.

It reminds one of the very first words of the liturgy of Matins from Ps. 51: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." That is, unless you do it, Lord, we won't be able to praise you because of our unbelief. But just a word from you, Lord . . . that's all we need. Just a word.