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Mark 7: 24-37
Pentecost 14B
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Open Mouths, Open Hearts

Jesus had been spending time in Jerusalem teaching some Pharisees and scribes, but every time he answered one of their questions he could see their eyes glaze over as they thought to themselves, “Who does this carpenter from Nazareth think he is? Does he think that he can teach us something about the laws of God?”

Jesus felt like he was banging his head against a brick wall and decided he needed to get away and rest for a while. Jesus went to the region of Tyre, which is far from Jerusalem and outside of Jewish territory. Jesus was sure he wouldn't run into any Pharisees or scribes way out there among all the Greeks.

Jesus entered the house he would be staying in for the week, softly closed the door, took the sandals off of his feet, and pulled the curtains on the windows shut. He breathed a sigh of relief. Finally he was alone.

Jesus was just resting his feet on the beat up coffee table when he heard a thunderous knocking at the door that made him jump. The woman he found when he opened the door didn't look like she was physically able to make such an ear-shattering sound, but she had a clear strong voice as she told Jesus about her daughter who was afflicted with a terrible demon that possessed her and shook her day and night. “Please,” the mother pleaded, “I beg you to help my daughter. I have heard of you Jesus of Nazareth and I know that you can heal her.”

And Jesus replied, “Stand in line and take your turn. The children get fed first. If there’s any left over, then the dogs get it.” It is not exactly what we would expect Jesus to say to someone. At first glance it makes Jesus sound like an insensitive jerk. This does not sound like the Jesus I know.

And then the mother does something quite startling. She doesn’t argue with Jesus. She doesn’t say to Jesus, “How dare you call me a dog. You are no man of God!” Instead she says, “Of course you’re right master, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” That’s all she was asking for – just a crumb of Jesus compassion and healing power and she knew her daughter would be alright.

Jesus was impressed with the mother’s words and told her, “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.”

Upon Jesus’ return some people brought to him a deaf man with a speech impediment.

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 area like rather rude behavior, he GRUNTED! Jesus groaned deeply. He looked up toward heaven as he

spoke toward the man: Ephatha! Be Opened!

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

I know the saliva deal doesn't sound very appetizing. But evidently that's exactly what was required. And unless it offends any of us too much, let's not forget those times when mother licked her fingers and wiped all that chocolate Oreo goo from around our mouths when we were little ones.

Jesus looked up to heaven and he groaned deeply. He mysteriously looked up into the clouds before turning to the man and saying out loud: Ephatha! Be Opened!

When I re-read this story, I couldn't help but think of Anne Lamott, the writer, who tells the amusing story of taking her father on errands one day. His brain cancer had progressed to the point where he was reverting to some behaviors of a three-year old. Just before Anne trotted into the local bank one day, she gave Dad a candy bar and strapped him into the passenger seat of her car. There was a huge line at the teller's window where Anne was standing. So, every so often, she would run over to peek out the bank's front window to make sure that Dad was still there, as if someone was going to kidnap him or something.

She writes: "The last time I looked, he wasn't there. The car was empty. I felt like adrenaline had

been injected into my heart. I stared out the window and saw this crazy old man pass by the window. His face was smeared with chocolate. He was just walking on by, holding his candy bar, staring up at the sky as if maybe his next operating instructions were up there."

Jesus mysteriously stared up at the sky while massaging the tongue and the ears of a distressed man. We don't know why he was looking up and surveying the clouds. Perhaps it was as if his next operating instructions were up there. Maybe he was looking for power from God, power he did not have apart from God. Maybe God actually spoke to him at that moment and agreed with him that this particular man's bondage must definitely end. Maybe Jesus was looking for help to shake the crowd he could not shake. Or maybe (and this is my best guess), 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 happen in this man's spirit and attitude."

When you come right down to it, spiritual miracles delight our Lord 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 the question: How is our Lord ever going to get all of us to "open up" our lives a bit more freely? It's going to take a huge spiritual miracle in each one of us, if we're going

to shed the different spiritual boxes in which we live. But we have to begin to find better ways to live as if God matters. We need to release the ligament that's holding back our tongues from speaking more joyously of God. The world is going to ignore the church (and the people inside of it) if we cannot find anything important to say about this faith we cherish.

EPHATHA! Be Opened! It's time we come alive with our faith and love in a more expressive way - every single day. If someone asked you why you believe this Jesus figure is really important to you, could you do more than gulp and stutter in some confusion?

Don't worry whether or not you have the "right" religious words to speak with others about the difference God makes to you. Religious talk will not change the world. You don't have to have a degree in theology to speak lovingly and convincingly of what God does for you in Jesus Christ.

We simply must find ways to articulate the faith and love in Jesus Christ that we hold so dear. A couple of years ago I heard the Rev. Peter Marty the former host of the radio program "Faith Matters" talk about a research project that revealed that 90% of teenagers active in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our church, could not tell you what their parent or parents believed. 90%! They didn't know! If adults cannot speak meaningfully and regularly of their faith, how will it ever get passed along?

This speech impediment we have on matters of faith is really quite peculiar. Because on most matters in this country, if you're really for something, you let people know. You put a bumper sticker on your car. You wear T-Shirts with logos. You tattoo your favorite expression on your

bicep.

If you're enthused about the difference that Christ Jesus makes in your life, why wouldn't you find a meaningful way to let people know ? and to share at least a piece of that joy? EPHATHA!
Be Opened!

When Martin Luther put together a baptismal service in 1523, the actual service required the pastor to take some of his own saliva and touch the ears and lips of every child getting baptized. At the same instant, the pastor was to repeat the words of Jesus to the deaf man, that one with the speech impediment. The baptizing pastor was to say: Ephatha - That is, be opened. We don't do this anymore in the Lutheran Church. And I'm not sure I'd be pastoring anywhere very long if I started using this saliva ritual at baptisms.

But the idea isn't bad. From the very get-go in life, with a lot of help from parents and pastors and adult mentors, and teachers we need to find better ways to not be so tongue-tied with our faith.

At a Bible Study I lead a few years back a woman I'll call Denise shared a story with us about how God opened up her family to talk about their faith. Denise was one of ten siblings, and she had four adult children of her own. One of Denise's sisters had been battling cancer. She was feeling very down so that year shortly after Christmas all ten siblings, including their children decided to spend a weekend together at a hotel to spend time together and relax. It was fun, but what Denise's children said they remembered most about that weekend was the prayer time that

they had with their aunt. One evening all of the siblings gathered around their sister anointed her with oil and prayed for her healing until their voices were raw.

Denise's children said to her, "This is what you really believe? That God can heal our aunt?" And Denise said, "Of course I do. That's what Jesus does. He heals people."

Denise's children didn't know if their aunt would be cured of cancer or not but she said they all told her in different words, "We have never experienced anything like that before! We could sense that God was in the room with us!" I think it was a spiritual miracle where Jesus opened everyone's heart to his presence and opened their mouths to talk about it.

As Jesus said, "Ephatha! Be Opened!" Have courage. Grab hold to what is good. Loosen up and love a bit more freely. Support the weak. Strengthen the faint-hearted. Honor all people. And for Jesus' sake, keep looking for those ways to open your life to the power of the Holy Spirit - relying on that great prayer of the Psalmist if it helps: O Lord, open my lips, and let my tongue declare your praise. Amen.