

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Mark 7:31-37; 2 Corinthians 3:4-11; Micah 7:18-20

Can you imagine being the man in our Holy Gospel? You're not only deaf, so that you can't hear those who try to communicate with you, but you have trouble speaking as well. Have you ever lost your voice for a while, or perhaps struggled with poor vision for some time? Imagine the frustration. He was a closed book to the world, unable to process much of what went around him, unable to share much of what went on within him. And then, one day, there's Jesus. I don't know if he noticed. He probably didn't. But someone did. They brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and mute.

But why bother? There was an insurmountable dilemma. How could he come to know the good news when he could not hear? How could he learn what God in His love was doing for him, for him eternally, in Christ Jesus? How could he hear an absolution? And how could he confess his faith, let alone utter a humble prayer to the Messiah? But here he was, deaf and mute, brought to Jesus, deaf and mute, yet brought to Jesus all the same.

To be fair, though, we didn't have it much better when someone or some people brought us to Jesus, whether they led us by the hand, carried us in their arms, or invited us with their words. St. Paul makes that clear in Ephesians 2:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Someone brought that deaf and mute man to Jesus, and Jesus was compassionate, and Jesus took Him aside. And that's when it gets really weird, isn't it, because what did Jesus do? We read: "*He 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.'*"

I don't know about you, but that seems pretty gross to me. Of all the cool things Jesus could have done—imagine the show He could have put on—spit of all things was the best He could come up with? Spit? At least He took the man aside when He did it, but still. Why in the world would Jesus go about things in just this way?

God loves to work through means, whether through a lamb at the Passover, Moses staff on so many occasions, Israel's trumpets at Jericho, the widow's oil jar, or the Jordan's muddy waters with Naaman. God uses means, that is, He works through things, and not always directly. And so Jesus spat. And it worked, whether it was how the deaf and mute man would have chosen to be healed or not. And in the end, what did it matter if it was how the deaf and mute man would have imagined getting healed. He got healed indeed, in a very real way, in the way Jesus chose, and that way, as we learn, sometimes in the school of hard knocks, is always best.

So what do you think? Next Baptism, when Mom and Dad bring Junior up, what do you say I spit on him? Wouldn't that be nice, just like Jesus did for the deaf and mute man? It would be a sweet moment, I'm sure; one the family would never forget. And maybe when you come up for Communion, I could spit on you too. At the very least, I think when we're shaking hands after the service, I should be sure to spit on mine first.

Don't worry. My spit is going to stay in my mouth. Jesus hasn't commanded me to spit on anyone. Jesus hasn't called me to spit. No, I'm called to declare and to work spiritual healing through the Word and the Sacraments. Water and bread and wine will work fine for visible signs, and you can without fear shake my hand after the service. God chooses the means, not me, and the means He has given to the church are clear, not to open physically deaf ears, but to open spiritually deaf ears to hear the good news of His grace in Christ, and not to loose physically mute tongues, but to loose spiritually mute tongues to praise God for such forgiveness and to tell its story.

God has given many of us considerable health compared to so many of those inflicted men and women we encounter in the Holy Gospels, compared to so many sick individuals we encounter in our daily lives, whether in our area or in parts of the world where men and women don't have the access to the level of medical care we have. And yes, God does give the unbeliever ears and tongues just as He gives them to Christians, but the miracle rests in the fact that God gives us such ears and tongues that gladly hear and learn God's Word and in turn willingly honor Him in word and song. And no, He does not do so through spit, but He does do so through means: through water in Baptism, bread and wine in Communion, and a preacher in Absolution or a sermon. He opens His mouth all the same, though not to spit, to speak to us reassuringly of His love in a way we can sense. And while He works through ministers in the process, He is Himself is the prime mover and His Spirit the guarantee, as St. Paul reminds us in our second lesson:

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

And so what's the moral of the story? Don't question, don't doubt, don't try to spice up or alter, don't second-guess or Monday-morning-quarterback how Jesus chooses to open your ears and loose your tongues, to forgive you and enable you to praise Him. Rather, rejoice that He has compassion, that He loves you, and that He does this great work for you, even though it is through simple means.

“And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well.” And He has done all things well. He has opened our closed ears to the saving message of His death for sinners. He has loosed our mute tongues to proclaim His marvelous deeds. And whether or not He grants us miraculous healing now, what could be more miraculous than the healing our mortal bodies will find when they are sown immortal in the resurrection? And so, just as they could not keep silent about the miracle Jesus had done for the deaf and mute man, let us be eager to bring others to this Jesus, to speak of the great miracle He has worked and continues to work for us through Baptism, His Word, and Holy Communion. Let Micah's words from our first lesson also be ours, so that we welcome them with open ears and echo them with loosed tongues:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

Amen.

