

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Isaiah 29:17-24; Mark 7:31-37

The poor man was deaf. The poor man had a speech impediment. The poor man certainly had his challenges in life. But the poor man wasn't blind. He could see. And what a joy it must have been when he saw Jesus. He might not have known this was the Son of God. He might not have known this was the Savior. But certainly must have known He was a healer, because He was being brought to Jesus for just that: healing. Those bringing Him begged the Lord to lay His hands on the man, and while a blessing would have been nice, icing on the cake, so to speak, it was a healing they were hoping to witness.

The poor man was deaf. The poor man had a speech impediment. The poor man certainly had his challenges in life. But the poor man wasn't blind. He could see. And what did Jesus do next? ***Jesus took Him aside.*** He didn't want to put on a show. And ***Jesus put His fingers in his ears.*** That might have seemed a bit odd, but all right, you're the healer Jesus, will put up with a little odd. But what did Jesus do next? Remember, the poor man was deaf, and had a speech impediment, but he wasn't blind; he could see. And what did Jesus do? ***Jesus spit and touched the man's mouth.***

That always strikes me. I can't help but try to imagine the man's reaction. How would I react? How would you react? I could do an experiment. I could spit and try to touch some of your tongues, but I think I know the answer. We'd recoil, wouldn't we? We might even try to stop Him. We'd certainly have some concerns, even if we kept them to ourselves. Jesus was the healer, and the healer is the one who knows how to heal, but wasn't there some other way? I mean, I'd have my doubts if my doctor tried to spit and touch my tongue, even though he's the one who went to medical school. So why? Why would Jesus act in such a way? Why wouldn't He just lay hands on the man and be done with it.

Notice how Jesus healed this man. He made contact with the man's ailments. He physically touched in very striking ways the areas of the man's body that were afflicted. It did no good for the man for Jesus only to have access to the pretty parts, so to speak. Jesus had to get dirty with the messy parts in order to make the man clean. And so He put His fingers in the man's ears. He touched the man's tongue.

And it sure seems like He was trying to make some sort of point, doesn't it? This much is clear. If this man was going to be healed, He needed Jesus precisely where the problems were. And guess what, for all the reservations that man might have had, and for all the advice we might have had to offer about the process, it worked, didn't it? Do you think that man was still worried about the spit when he heard his friends' voices or the birds sing? Do you think He cared about the spit anymore when he spoke clearly to his loved ones, probably oftentimes about this very story, recounting how Jesus had made him well and whole again? Jesus means might have been other than what he'd expected, but Jesus means were effective, even if they seemed like the last way God should operate.

In our first lesson God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to an obstinate Israel, slow to listen to His Word, quick to stray, storing up their coming undoing and ruin at the hands of foreign conquerors, the just desserts of their sins. Yet what did Isaiah say. At this low point in Israel's history, Isaiah spoke of a coming renewal, restoration, peace. He spoke at God's direction, ***"In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see."*** And: ***"And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding, and those who murmur will accept instruction."***

In a marvelous way that happened when Christ came and actually, truly, miraculously healed the deaf and blind, opening long-dormant ears and long-darkened eyes. But that also has happened and continues to happen through Christ in an even more splendid and lasting way. That has happened every time a sinner has heard the Word of God and believed, when the prodigal son or daughter has returned, when the lost sheep has been carried back into the fold, when you and I have confessed our sins, sometimes and long last, and heard the forgiveness, encouragement, and guidance of the Word, which both corrects the sinner and absolves the repentant. Our eyes have been opened to see through faith an eternity behind the transitory, glory in crosses, and God's potter's hand at work even in suffering, as He shapes us as jars of clay for this life and the life to come. Our ears have been opened to hear grace, consolation, reassurance, and tender invitation of our meek Savior to follow Him, even through the valley of the shadow of death, for He is the Good Shepherd, whose voice we are trained to hear through His Word, still ***“living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart,”*** as our Verse of the Day reminds us.

The poor man was deaf. The poor man had a speech impediment. But the poor man wasn't blind. He could see. And what a marvelous thing he saw as Jesus took hold of His afflictions and made him well, made him whole. Still today many question God's means, how He does what He does for us, just as that man probably questioned Jesus' methods that day, at least in his head, as Jesus put His fingers in the man's ears, spat and touched his tongue. But it worked. The man just had to bear with Jesus' ways, just had to trust Him. And the same is true for us. Jesus must reach into our afflictions. He must be invited into our wounds in order to heal them. Whatever sins, trials, or transgressions have afflicted Him, these are not things to hide from our Lord, but to seek His aid and presence in through pious prayer. It does no good to show the Lord only the pretty parts. We go to a physician for healing. Jesus must get messy to do His work, to excise our sin, to patch together our shattered souls and spirits. And our Lord isn't afraid to get messy. He is the Lord who stuck His fingers in ears, spit and touched tongues, became a mess of sweat, blood, dust, and thorns as He carried His cross to Calvary and then died on it to save us, to heal us, to make us whole, one with Himself, His Father, and the Spirit once again. Sure, His means might seem different than how we'd expect God to operate, but they work, with time, with attention, with prayer, and with heartfelt trust, as His Word, recorded for us on the pages of Scripture, speaks to our ears sometimes hard of hearing when it comes to His law, as His Body and Blood touches our tongues sometimes stammering, slow to confess our sins, wobbly rudders, as water sanctified with His Word runs down our heads, sometimes home to impious and unproductive thoughts.

And so while His means might not be what we'd expect, feeding the faith without wowing the flesh, we shouldn't wish them to be any different than they are. Just as later that day Jesus spat and touched that man's tongue was recognized as the best day of that man's life, so our days with the Bible, at the altar, and when we and our children got wet with simple water wed with the Word will in the end be the best, the most meaningful days we will have had on this earth and in this life as well.

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. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”Amen.