

Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

'Behold, your God ... He will come and save you.'

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'Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him.'

They were right to beseech the Christ on behalf of the deaf mute, for *'blessed are all who take refuge in him.'* And *'whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered.'*

Jesus suffers this deaf man to come before Him, as He summons the broken of all the earth to gather before His sight, *'for God shows no partiality.'*

Our Lord indeed does hear the cries of those who call Him; He is a refuge to all who trust in Him. He is not slow to act. *'He will come and save you.'*

So *"He took him aside from the crowd privately."* Jesus tears him away from the ignorant crowd. His works will not be a spectacle for them. And once He has gotten the deaf man alone, He acts strangely. He puts His fingers into the deaf man's ears, and after spitting, touches the deaf man's tongue. And having done this, He looks up to heaven, and, sighing, said to this miserable wretch, *"Ephphatha"—"be opened."*

To anyone watching, to anyone of the crowd that might have snuck his way into the corner where Jesus was performing his miracle, this little ritual would have seemed at best like some sort of magical incantation, or perhaps some kind of folk medicine. Or perhaps Jesus was just mad, and performed the works of madness.

And yet, this deaf man hears, and this mute man speaks. He is healed. Perhaps there is more to these little actions than the crowd is able to discern. Perhaps it is

more than just non-sense. The masses lack eyes to see. And that is alright; they are simple gentiles. They have been given neither the scriptures, nor the key to understanding it; the key of Christ eternal.

Yet even to us, who have been granted the illumination of Baptism, to hear the Word of Scripture rightly, and behold the sacred vision of Christ within its pages; even to us, Our Lord's works can seem confounding.

But this is because we, who are simple, do not understand what it is our Lord does. We think that Jesus seeks to heal this man. Our Lord seeks to show that He will not heal this man, but recreate him; for Jesus Himself is the creator of the world all within it, as it is written: *'By Him, all things were made.'*

With His hands He touches all that is ill in the man, as if to reform them, as the psalmist sings: *"Your hands have made me and fashioned me."* Spitting, He gives to the deaf man, as it were, water to make clay out of the dust of his body, for the Law instructs: *"You are dust, O Man."* For dust falls apart and decays, but when it is given water, the water of creation, the water over which *"the Spirit of God hovered,"* it can be formed by its master into any shape. Here *'waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; and the burning sand shall become a sea.'*

Jesus then, having touched the sick man's tongue, sighs; a breath from His own heart, a breath which conveys love. Holding the man's tongue, Jesus breathes out, just as He breathed into the first man, Adam, in the garden. And finally, He looks up to heaven, and declares *'be opened'*. Now the man is healed, he is recreated; indeed he is remade by his true Maker. *"And behold, it was all very good."* For *"He has done all things well."*

To the Christian theologian, the mysteries of Our Lord's works may be discerned. But to the deaf-mute, it was far from obvious. No one in this time could read, unless they were rich. This man had no access to the scriptures as they were written. Neither in the comfort of home, nor in the halls of an ancient library, nor in the sanctum of the synagogue could this man read the Word of the Lord.

And not only this. He is deaf. He cannot hear God's word spoken to him. He cannot hear any words. Nor could anyone have communicated to him these words. For him there is no language at all. He is utterly cut off from the words of God, utterly cut off from the Law of Sinai, the sweet promise of the murdered

prophets, utterly cut off from the faith of Israel; a gentile devoid of truth.

Yet it is written '*Behold, your God*', and so with his eyes, the deaf man *sees* the word of God, for '*the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory.*'

With this feeble sight, he learns from Jesus all he needs to know. Jesus puts His fingers in the deaf man's ears, and the deaf man understands: "Yes! I have never heard anything, neither have I known anything. I am without knowledge. I am ignorant!" Then Jesus touches his tongue, and the mute understands: "No Lord, nothing has ever come from my tongue, nothing good. No praise, no confession, no thanks, no worship."

Our Lord spits, perhaps even spits on him, spits in his face, and in his mind he agrees: "Yes, I'm disgusting. I am a shame, and all my life is a regret. It would have been better had I never been born." The Lord sighs in His love and everlasting mercy.

Here he has found a man, humble, and lowly; a man who has no power, no pride, no ambition. He has found a man who is nothing but dust, destined to return to dust; and yet with such dust *Our Lord is well pleased*. In loving kindness, He sighs, and says to him '*Ephphatha, That is, Be opened.*'

These are the first words that this man ever heard: '*Be opened.*' Never had his ears heard anything, not a word, not a sound. He had no experience of the sense we call 'hearing.' So the Lord blesses him, that the first words spoken to him of his life is '*Ephthatha, Be opened*', for '*all men are liars*' but '*the Word of the Lord endures forever.*' So before all else, as none else since Adam, he hears first and only the words of our Lord, the words of God; the Word of God which opened this man up, the Word which, entering in through his ears, created in him faith.

And behold, this Word, having entered through his ear, could not help but pour out in praise toward God through his now opened mouth. This man indeed is truly blest. This man is the work, the doing of God. His ear knows only the word of God, his tongue, only the praise of God. He is a new creation, a man reborn of faith in the Word; of water and the Spirit. And so he participates in the first Christian Divine Liturgy.

A day will come, dear Christians, when your mouth will be stopped, your ears

closed, your eyes blinded. The chatter will cease, the noise will end. You will be on your death bed, receiving your last rites from the hand of your pastor. Your final “Amen” will be a frail, slurred excuse for speech. Your tongue will stop with your heart; and the crying and mourning of your friends and family will fade to silence. Blackness. Nothingness.

Those who live on will take your body and commend it to the earth, a faithful imitation of the crowd, commending the body of the deaf-mute to the hands of Jesus. And kept in this earth, within your grave, you will dissolve to dust, *‘for to dust thou shalt return.’* Everything will be gone, your ambitions, your aspirations, your dreams. It will all come to nothing; you will be brought to nothing.

And then you will hear it: *“Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”* Like a bolt of lightning and a clap of thunder striking you awake from a deep sleep, you will come alive. *‘Ephphatha,’* the first words of the new and un-ending day. Your eyes will see all the earth melt away before you like a dream, and the vision of the Revelation of St. John will surround you.

You will rise up into the choir of seraphs and angels, a saint of God, your ears opened to the proclamation of the eternal Word of Christ, and your tongue joining the voices of ten thousand million of the saints in praising the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

What you see now on Sunday, in little more than a shadow, you will see in its full glory, *‘face to face’* a cosmic liturgy, *‘with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven’* as the choir, all the faithful as the congregation, and the sacrificed Christ himself sitting upon the altar as His throne, Himself the priest, Himself the sacrifice. There will be a New Heavens, and a New Earth, and behold, it will be *“very good.”* Then, with your senses opened to all the mystery of God, and His Word united to your very soul, you will sing the truth together with the innumerable multitude of heaven:

“He has done all things well. He makes even the deaf to hear, and the mute to speak.”

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Isaiah 35:4-7; James 2:1-10, 14-18; Mark 7:31-37.