

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity
September 3, 2017

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St. Paul, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

HE HAS DONE ALL THINGS WELL

Isaiah 29:18-24; II Corinthians 3:4-11; Mark 7:31-37

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

In today's Gospel lesson we are again shown that our Lord, as those who witnessed His works proclaimed, "has done all things well." The Lord had promised through the prophet Isaiah that in the day of His coming: "the deaf shall hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness;" and that this would be a sign of His victory over the devil, and over all of those who have followed the devil in their unbelief and rebellion against the Lord and against His Word. And now we see the Lord opening the ears of a deaf man that he may hear the Word of life, and loosing His tongue to speak.

The man does not come to Jesus on his own, for how could one who could not hear know to come to Him whose Words give life? So He is brought by friends who plead on his behalf. Jesus, hearing their supplications, first takes the deaf man aside, away from the crowd. Then He does some things that might seem strange. First He puts His fingers into the man's ears. Now normally we put fingers in our ears to stop sound from entering. But Jesus puts His fingers into the man's ears to open them that sound may at last enter and be received by them. And then He spits and puts the spittle onto the man's tongue. Again spit is usually something we expel from our mouths, not put into them. And having someone else's spit get into your mouth might make you gag and sputter in disgust. But Jesus spit loosens the man's tongue that He may begin not to sputter incoherently but to speak plainly. And Jesus accompanies these physical actions with His own speech, saying "Ephphatha!" which means "be opened." And the ears are opened and the tongue is freed.

Now this is quite a miracle! As an example of humility, Jesus tells them not to tell others about what He has done; but the crowd is astonished. And the more He tells them not to spread the word about it, the more they proclaim it. For indeed He had done all things well!

This should come as no surprise to us who have heard in the four Gospels so many stories of Jesus performing miracles and healing those who were sick, demon-possessed, or in some way disabled. What is interesting about this particular instance of healing is the way in which what happens mirrors the

pattern of our own salvation and of the life we are to lead in Christ. Ah, but how does the healing of a deaf mute apply to you who have always been able to hear and to speak? While it likely does not apply to you in a physical way, it certainly does in a spiritual way. For every person born into this world (with the exception of our Lord, of course) is conceived spiritually deaf and mute. St. Paul says that: "the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." The natural man cannot know them because the natural man is deaf to God's Word, bearing the fallen nature of our first parents whose sin was to turn away from God's Word and believe instead the deceptions of the devil. Because we have inherited not just our bodies from those first parents but also a fallen nature, we are conceived in unbelief, with ears closed to the Lord's life-giving words and graces. And so because we are born spiritually deaf, we are also spiritually mute, unable to confess what is true and what is real.

But that which is false, that which is contrary to God, that which flows from our fallenness, and that which is promoted by the deceiver - that is natural to us. Those words we can hear and can speak with ease. This is the language that sounds forth so strongly in today's world, language that, as Isaiah describes it, "make a man an offender by a word, and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate, and turn aside the just by empty words." You encounter these words every day, words that claim to be just but that deny truth; words that seek to avoid all offense to those in sin, but by their denial of the Law of God are offensive to Him and to His saints; words that speak of love and acceptance, but that really promote the love of the wrong things and the acceptance of things that ought to be shunned.

And because we are conceived with such an aversion to what God says and to how God is, we cannot come to Him on our own. So like the deaf mute in the Gospel lesson, others must bring us to the Lord that He may heal us and open our ears to His grace and truth. For many of you these "friends" were your parents who brought you to hear God's Word even in the womb, and, shortly after your birth, at the baptismal font. Others of you came later, brought by others. But none of you were brought to Christ on your own without the help and intercession of others. And at the font the Lord preformed a miracle for you like the one He performed for that man in the Gospel lesson.

There our Lord separates you from the crowd of the unbelieving. For when you are baptized a change is made by God in you. In the words of the prayers of the baptismal liturgy, you are sundered from the number of the unbelieving. And the baptized are called upon at that point and ever after to renounce the devil and all His works and all His ways.



Then now thrusts His fingers into your ears and with His own mouth opens your mouth. How does He put His fingers into your ears? St. Jerome says that the fingers of the Lord are the graces of the Holy Spirit and that the spittle of the Lord is issuing forth of His Word. In the font the Holy Spirit, by the Word of Christ, creates in you a new and holy nature, such that you are henceforth deemed a new creature. And this new nature, because it is conceived by God the Spirit, is born with the ability to hear and receive the Lord's Word. And the Lord speaks forth as water is applied to you the life giving phrase: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This is His "Ephphatha!" to you, the word that opens your ears and loosens your tongue that you may hear Him in faith and speak from faith. His Word becomes your own word as your tongue is loosed to confess with the whole Church throughout the world the saving works of Christ and the faith we hold in Him.

But our speaking is not confined to that event. No it continues throughout our lives as we confess Jesus and His salvation first among our fellow Christians and then in the midst of the increasingly unbelieving world in which we find ourselves. Like the crowds whom Jesus tried to silence, how can we be silent about what we have received? Though He should say to us "tell no one" still we should be compelled by joy to speak of it. And He has not forbidden us, but rather says: "Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops." For this is the way that we begin to bring others to Christ, others who suffer in deafness and who neither know nor confess Him because they have not received His healing word and touch. And all the while we must plead for them in prayer that the Lord would lay His hand upon them, so to speak, and heal them by bringing them to faith too.

And now we who were once brought by others to Christ, are the friends who do the bringing. And the cycle of Christ's saving work and of His Gospel going forth into our world is continued.

But the cycle continues not just for others but for us as well. The healing our Lord has given to us by opening our ears and loosing our tongues is a healing that must be received by us continually - not because His work in baptism is incomplete or ineffective, but because we so easily and so often fall into the old ways of sin and unbelief. And so we are called upon to daily renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways as we turn away from the lies that ring in our ears from those who would turn us away from Jesus, and reject the words that run counter to His Word, repenting of our sins and of the unbelief and rebellion we find at work in our own hearts and in our flesh. And separating ourselves from the world again by repentance, we turn to hear Christ's forgiving and lifegiving voice - returning again and again to His Word, hearing the preaching of His Church; studying, meditating upon and praying from the Scriptures proclaimed to us; joining with those whose voices confess to us and with us the Faith that has been delivered to us and to all the saints. This is what we do every time we gather together to receive the things of Christ each Sunday. Here

in the liturgy of the Church, by the Word of Christ, our ears are again opened and our tongues are loosed and are trained by the preaching of the Gospel, by words of the liturgy, by the confession of the creed, by the hymns and chants we sing, to speak plainly.

And we need this, brothers and sisters in Christ. For as St. Paul says, we are not sufficient in ourselves, and nothing holy comes from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God alone. We need this both for ourselves as we struggle to be faithful and to live the life to which we have been called; and for those who need us to be the friends who will bring them to Jesus and who will plead to Christ for their healing. And our Lord, who did all things well when He taught and healed people in Galilee, when He taught and healed in Judea, when He ascended to the cross outside Jerusalem, when He rose from the dead the third day, when He ascended to the Father's right hand, and when He sent His Spirit into the world, continues by that same Spirit to do all things well for us. He is gracious and eager to heal us and to strengthen us, that we who were once deaf and dumb, may now and always be made to hear and to speak by His grace, to whom belongs all honor and glory now and forever. Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +