

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 6, 2009
Mark 7:31-37

“The Healing Touch: Ephphatha”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Our Gospel lesson for this day presents us with one of those “little moments” from the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is one of those times when his power shone forth in a miraculous way. But it is from the little details of this account, details which are often found in the Gospel of St. Mark, that we have drawn the theme for this morning—The Healing Touch: Ephphatha. The Old Testament lesson for this week will also lend some prophetic and powerful words to our understanding. And the epistle from St. James, which appears to not have much connection, will bring us a useful application of our theme. May the Lord bless us this morning as we meditate on His holy Word, especially the one word: Ephphatha and find there The Healing Touch.

I. A Miracle

The account of the Gospel takes place following a journey which Jesus made into new territory. When St. Mark records that the Lord left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon he is informing his readers that Jesus travelled into Gentile territory. Indeed the verses immediately before our text relate the story of Jesus’ healing the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, a Gentile. So it is in this context that our text opens with Jesus traveling back to the Holy Land. But he journeys to the east side of the sea of Galilee, the region of the ten cities, the Decapolis. Now this was a region also of mixed population. There were many Gentiles there as well as Jews. And as he arrived there, a group of people brought to him a man who was deaf and whose speech was very handicapped. “They begged him to lay his hand on him.” (v.32) We see from this request that the crowd there knew something of the healing touch of Jesus. They expect Jesus’ touch to do something.

Now it is also very apparent that Jesus understood the situation very well. We read in the next verses of our text: 33And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. 34And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” There are many explanations as to why Jesus went through such a lengthy process with this man. But the most plausible is this: Jesus took great care with this man to explain to him what was going to take place. He used a simple form of sign language with him. He put his fingers in his ears. He spits and touches his tongue. He looks up to heaven. To a person who could not hear or speak well, the Lord is preaching a visual sermon. He is letting him know what will take place. And St. Mark also gives us the very word which Jesus speaks. Again, note that it is not a long prayer or request. It is not a grand dramatic gesture. It is one word. This is much like what Jesus did when he raised the daughter of Jarius with two words: Talitha kum (Child, arise!) Here he speaks one

word: Ephphatha! (Be opened!) And with that word it was done.

This should not be surprising. After all, this is the Lord who spoke the words at creation and brought all things into being. "Let there be light" and there was light. This is the Lord who sustains all things by the word of his power. For in this healing miracle our Lord Jesus is participating in the work of the Holy Trinity in creation. The Word which was made flesh for us speaks His word and it is done. I would like to share a personal story about a visit to the dentist several years ago. I had a tooth that needed to be extracted and since it had been already treated with a root canal, the dentist informed me that sometimes teeth like that grow right into the jaw bone. Anyway, he was having a very difficult time pulling the tooth and I began to think that maybe a prayer might be appropriate. And for some reason, just the one word, "Ephphatha" came to my mind. And the tooth came out. Talk about an answer to prayer!

But back to the text: the man hears. It is not specifically said in the text, but I believe that the very first thing this man heard was Jesus' command "Ephphatha!" And he speaks as well. His tongue is loosened and he speaks plainly. The text does not indicate what he says, but I am sure it was words of thanks and praise.

II. A Response

And there is a response by the crowd gathered there as well. Jesus tells them not to tell anyone. But the more he says that, the more they keep talking about this miracle. And the people are filled with amazement: "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." The people do not know quite what to make of Jesus but they speak truthfully. They see the amazement of it all. And they say of Him, he has done all things well. That means more than even they could have imagined. In Jesus is the fulfillment of the words we hear spoken by the prophet Isaiah in today's Old Testament lesson. "Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong, fear not. Behold, your God will come, ... he will come and save you.' Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy." In Jesus is the restoration to a world that is broken by sin. In Him we find the hope that is so desperately needed. The miracle which Jesus performed put people in amazement. In a real sense, it was to show again to a sometime skeptical crowd, who Jesus was. It was a moment when the healing power of God broke through into a world of sorrow and sin and in the healing touch of Jesus brought healing to a man in need.

But as the Old Testament lesson reminds us, the Lord's primary work is to save us. O yes, he will save the world. Indeed, he has won the victory but the final consummation is yet to be. We live in the now and the not yet. We have the hope, the assurance, the promise, the victory. But we are still surrounded by illness and despair, by unbelief and violence. The world has not regained the peace of Eden. It is still bound so much in sin. And with the world, we continue to need to feel the healing touch of the Lord.

III. An Application

And here is where the Epistle for this day fits. St. James reminds everyone of the “royal law” of the Scripture: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He speaks of the dangers of showing partiality to the rich and influential and failing to care for those in need. A word of comfort is a good thing but actions are also important. Now we as Lutherans sometime get nervous when we hear these words of the Epistle. “Faith without works is dead.” But the faith we have is a faith that should be active in love. We are to show in our lives the love which the Lord has first shown to us. In these days when the economy is not really showing signs of a rapid recovery and when the number of unemployed keeps rising and when the needs of many may become more pressing, it may be a challenge to all of us to be helpful in useful ways. But the Lord does not put off the challenge to each of us. Our lives should indeed be lives of service. And in those lives of service, our examples become a witness to our faith. Please note that in the Gospel for today, the only reason the man who was deaf and mute was with Jesus was because the crowd brought him to him. We can say that the Lord is active in the world. But we are so often his hands, his feet, his voice to those around us. That is why the word is still true, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And in our lives of faith which grow in works we continually strive to serve.

Above all else, let us not forget the healing touch of Jesus himself. For he reaches out with nail pierced hands and gathers us to himself. We who are spiritually blind and deaf and dead, hear his word: Ephphatha (Be opened!) And we hear and believe and know that we are his, saved and redeemed to serve. For now we are his hands as well.

As we sang before:

O Son of God in Galilee,
You made the deaf to hear,
The mute to speak, the blind to see;
O blessed Lord, be near.

The speechless tongue, the lifeless tongue
You can restore, O Lord;
Your “Ephphatha,” O Savior dear,
Can instant help afford.

In Jesus’ Name. Amen.