

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity
St. Mark 7:31-37: "Jesus Frees Us to Speak Rightly."
September 7/8, 2019 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Gracious God, whose blessed Son set forth Your love towards mankind, in His miracles of healing and mercy, making both the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak: Grant that our ears may be opened to Your Word, and our tongues loosed to proclaim it to others, and to further the spreading of Your Gospel among all nations; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 118)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the seventh chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

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. / And taking him aside from the crowd privately, 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." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. / 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." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who promises that if we abide in His Word, we will know the truth and the truth will set us free (Joh. 8:31,32), dear fellow redeemed:

Three friends were riding in a car when a familiar song came on, a song they all liked. So they started to sing along. Feeding off one another's enthusiasm, they started to sing louder and louder. But then something happened that brought the singing to a dead stop. One of them sang different words than the others. This started an argument about what the words actually were, an argument that could only be settled by looking up the lyrics. It turns out that one of the friends had learned the words wrong and had always sung the words wrong.

Something like this has happened to each of us. We have consistently sung the wrong thing or we mispronounced a word because we did not learn it the right way. Right hearing and learning is necessary for right speaking.

We see this in the case of the man in today's text. He had two problems: he "*was deaf and had a speech impediment.*" Those problems typically go together. If he had been deaf for most of his life, he would have hardly if ever heard the sound of others speaking. Then how could he know

how to shape sounds into words? Young children learn to speak by listening to and mimicking others. This man could make sounds, but it was very difficult for him to communicate.

Jesus took the man aside, touched his unhearing ears and unspeaking tongue and said, “*Ephphatha*” – “*Be opened.*” Then we are told that “*his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.*” The word “plainly” is a translation of the Greek word *orthos*. This word is more commonly translated as “rightly” or “correctly.” We see this root word in “orthodontist,” the term for a person who works to correct or straighten your teeth. Or in “orthopedic,” the term for a person trying to correct deformities in the skeletal structure.

In theology, we have another *ortho* word in “orthodox.” This word describes those who believe, teach, and confess the right things on the basis of God’s Word. But it is not possible for a person to come to a right understanding and confession of the Word on his own. He must gain the correct and right beliefs by the power and working of God.

This faith can only come by the power of God the Holy Spirit working through the holy Word. This is what is taught in the tenth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. There Paul asks, “*How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*” (vv. 14,17).

We confess this in the explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith” (Luther’s *Small Catechism*). God does this work. He frees us from the chains of sin and death, so that we have life and hope in Him.

This language of “freeing from chains” is found in today’s text. When Jesus spoke the Word to the deaf man, the text literally says that the “bond” or “chain” of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke rightly. The man could not free himself from this bondage. Jesus had to release him. The same goes for our sinful state. Martin Luther described this in one of his hymns: “Fast bound in Satan’s chains I lay; / Death brooded darkly o’er me. / Sin was my torment night and day; / In sin my mother bore me. / Yea, deep and deeper still I fell; / Life had become a living hell, / So firmly sin possessed me” (ELH 378, v. 2).

We were wrapped up in sin and death, and Satan had us in his grasp. But God sent His Son to crush Satan’s head and set us free. Jesus accomplished this by letting Himself be wrapped up in our sin and death. All the world’s wrongdoing was tightly bound to Him. As He suffered for our sins, He heard no word of comfort; His ears were closed to it. He spoke no word in His defense; His tongue stuck to His jaws (Psa. 22:15).

When His suffering was complete, He said, “It is finished.” This was like telling the gates of heaven to “be opened” wide—opened to you and me and all who would believe in Him. That is how we have access to heaven—not by our works—but by faith. Heaven is opened to us because Jesus freed us from our chains, and the Holy Spirit has brought us to faith in Him, the only Savior of mankind.

There are many today, even within the broader Christian church, who think that salvation can be found even in non-Christian religions. About a month ago, the largest Lutheran church body in America (the ELCA) met for its "Churchwide Assembly." One of the policies adopted there was "A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment." Some of the things expressed in this document were fine, such as how we should love our neighbors no matter who they are. But it also states that "we must be careful about claiming to know God's judgments regarding another religion or the individual human beings who practice it" (lines 639-641). And, "we also must be careful not to judge our neighbors only on the basis of their religious beliefs, as they may or may not tell us much about how our neighbors relate to God" (lines 644-646).

In other words, this statement says that we cannot assert that only those who believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin will be saved. And we cannot judge someone's false beliefs, because they might have a closer relationship with God than their beliefs express. One brave delegate went to the microphone before the policy was adopted. He made the motion that these unbiblical statements be replaced with the words of Jesus in John 14:6 where He says, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" This motion was defeated, and the policy was passed with more than 97% voting in favor.

This was not "orthodoxy" on display, or "right beliefs." It was "heterodoxy," or "different beliefs." Heterodoxy does not come from the Bible. It comes from human thinking. Heterodoxy comes from a desire to please the world. Heterodox churches speak the wrong thing because they are hearing the wrong thing. They do not listen to and learn from the unchanging Word. They listen to and learn from the values and agendas of modern society and culture.

Orthodox churches, on the other hand, do not please the world. They call sinners to repentance and faith on the basis of the Word alone. Orthodox churches teach that only the Triune God should be worshiped, because He alone is the true God, and He commands us to have no other gods (First Commandment). Orthodox churches teach what the apostles did, that "*there is salvation in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*" (Act. 4:12).

This is the orthodox teaching that God has called us to hear and confess in this congregation and also to share with those who have not learned what is right. But just because we have the right teaching now does not mean we will always have it. The grandparents and great-grandparents of many in attendance at the "Churchwide Assembly" confessed the right teaching of the Bible in their lifetimes. But now that has been lost.

By God's grace we still have the right teaching. We do not have it because we are somehow better or more gifted than others. We certainly do not deserve it. We all stand before God by nature with ears closed and tongues tied. But God's mercy toward us is abundant. He reaches out to touch us through His Word and Sacraments, so that our ears are opened to the truth, and our tongues are freed to speak rightly.

Imagine how strange it must have been for the man when Jesus put His fingers into His ears and touched his tongue with spit-covered fingers! Jesus did not have to do this, but it was a visible way to show the man that Jesus was concerned about his disability. Similarly, Jesus did not have to give us the visible means of Baptism and the Lord's Supper to convey His blessings.

But they are ways for Him to show us and remind us that He is present and wants to free us from the sins that trouble us.

This is what Jesus does for us every time we hear His Word of grace. He comes to attend to each one of us personally. He cares about us and knows the things that trouble us. He brings us the forgiveness of our sins, which He obtained on the cross for all people. He opens our hearts to believe that this forgiveness is certain for us.

He willingly shed His blood to atone for our weak desire to hear His Word, to atone for our reluctance to speak the truth, to atone for our sin of thinking we know better than He does. We are forgiven of all these sins by His grace delivered through His Word. And through the same Word, He sends the Holy Spirit to guide us to learn and grow in His truth, so that we believe, teach, and confess only what is right and reject all that is unholy or false.

How can we be so sure we have the truth? We can be sure because God's Word is truth (Joh. 17:17). Where does God speak this truth? In the Bible. The Bible is God's Word. We study the Bible so that we know the orthodox teaching. We don't want to be caught with our ears plugged and our tongues silent when the devil leads an attack on God's Word. We want to be prepared to say and to sing and even to think the right thing, so that God's truth is proclaimed, His will is done, and His name is glorified.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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