

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Mark 7:31-37: “Jesus Is the Minister of Righteousness.”
August 27, 2023 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty and everlasting God, who created all things, we thank You that You have given us sound bodies, and have graciously preserved our tongues and other members from the power of the adversary: We beseech You, grant us Your grace, that we may rightly use our ears and tongues; help us to hear Your Word diligently and devoutly, and with our tongues so to praise and glorify Your grace, that no one is offended by our words, but that all may be edified by them; through Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, p. 161)

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. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who came to bring healing not just for bodies but also for souls, not just for this life but for the life to come, dear fellow redeemed:

If you could change one thing about your body, one thing that would make you happier and more content, what would it be? For some of us (maybe many of us), it would be our weight – “I wish I could trim off a few pounds.” Others of us might say, “I wish I were a little bit taller.” “I wish I were stronger.” “I wish I were prettier.” Most of these wishes have to do with how other people see us. We want them to think we look good, because that helps us feel better about ourselves.

Or maybe what you would like to change is not so much your appearance, but your health. “I wish this pain in my joints or my back would go away.” “I wish I could get back the energy and mobility I used to have.” “I wish my heart were more reliable.” “I wish this cancer were gone.” And there is no question that being healed of these things would be a great relief. But how far would it take you? Would you actually be happier and more content if you received exactly what you wanted?

Today we hear about a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Those two things often go together. If you grow up being unable to hear, or unable to hear correctly, you won't know how to control the sounds that you make with your mouth. Communication for this man was certainly difficult, but he had gotten along so far. He did not have a life-threatening illness or demon-possession like other people Jesus had healed. But the people figured that if Jesus could help with those things, He could *"lay His hand on"* this man and heal him too.

While the people had confidence in Jesus, it isn't exactly the case that they believed in Him. They believed that He had special powers, and they were really hoping to see Him use them. But they did not believe He was the promised Savior of the world. What they were hoping for was a miracle of physical healing and not much more.

Jesus of course knew this about them. We see how He took the deaf man away from the crowd, because He wasn't interested in making a spectacle of it. He sighed deeply—even groaned—as He looked toward heaven, saddened by the whole situation. And then after the miracle had been performed, He charged the people not to tell anyone what He had done—an order which they totally ignored.

But why would Jesus order them not to tell? Well what kind of message do you think they shared? Would you guess that they talked more about who He was, or about what He was able to do? *"He has done all things well!"* they cried. *"He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak!"* The message was that Jesus mattered because of the physical healing He could perform.

This message could have led some to wonder, "Who is Jesus anyway? How is He able to do the things He does?" Those are the questions all the people should have been asking. But many just looked at Him as a means to get what they wanted. "If Jesus could take away this problem, or this problem, I would be so free. Then I could do whatever I wanted again."

You can see how getting healed by Jesus did not guarantee that people would follow Him. We see the same thing today. Our merciful Lord regularly blesses the medical treatment people receive, so that their life is extended. Or He preserves people from greater harm when they could have easily died. Many who have been through these things will even express that they have "a new lease on life." But their attitude toward God doesn't change. They don't give thanks to the One who gives them their daily bread, who gives them everything they have and everything they need for this life.

And the same often goes for us. We might fervently pray for one thing, one physical gift, whether it be healing from an infection or disease, or for improved health. We say that we will dedicate our whole life to God if only He will fix this one thing. But how much changes for us if that healing comes? It usually doesn't take long before we forget what God has done for us. And then we take up a new petition, a new concern, that would make our lives so much better if only God would help.

There is always another problem. This makes me think of the animated movie *Aladdin* by Disney. When dirt-poor Aladdin learned he had three wishes to ask for whatever he wanted, he figured he really only needed one and said he would happily use one of the wishes to free the

genie. But that first wish didn't accomplish everything Aladdin wanted. More issues and needs kept coming up. That's how life is in this sinful world. We cannot have a perfect existence here.

Instead of looking for happiness and contentment through the relief of our physical problems, Jesus wants us to look to Him. That was the message for Paul, who pleaded for the Lord to remove his "thorn in the flesh." Surely God would grant this request to His loyal servant, who endured tremendous affliction for preaching the Gospel! Paul prayed specifically for this three times, and this was the Lord's answer, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"* (2Co. 12:9).

The question is not whether God has the power to heal us. Of course He does. The question is whether that healing is the best thing for us. God's response to Paul was that his thorn in the flesh would be a reminder to Paul of His grace toward him. Paul would have to rely on the Lord's strength instead of his own, which is what he realized and confessed. Paul said, *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.... For when I am weak, then I am strong"* (vv. 9, 10).

What Jesus does for us—that is what matters. Today's Epistle lesson is about the change brought by our Savior's coming. It contrasts the ministry of condemnation and death with the ministry of righteousness and life (2Co. 3:4-11). The ministry of condemnation is the work of God's Law on our hearts which convicts us of our sin, sins like worry and impatience in our suffering, and sins like forgetting the mercy of God toward us. The ministry of righteousness is the Holy Spirit applying the gracious work of Jesus to us sinners.

God sent His Son to infuse life into this world of death. We see this so vividly in Jesus' healing touch. The man's ears and tongue which were "broken" because of sin in this world, Jesus touched with His holy hands. Then He spoke His powerful Word. The man didn't have the physical ability to hear this Word, but Jesus' Word made its way through the damaged parts of his outer ear, middle ear, or inner ear and into his brain and set all those mechanisms right again.

That's what Jesus' Word does, it sets everything right. His Word sets our hearts right and our minds right. His Word sets our homes right and the teaching of our churches right. His Word sets our priorities and our plans and our hopes right. When the man's tongue was released, we are told that he was now able to speak rightly (Greek: *orthos*).

The people said, *"He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak,"* as though that were the most he could do or the height of what He could do. But He came to do something much bigger and much better than physical healing. Putting His fingers into the man's ears was just a small sign of who He is and what He came to do. The Son of God put His whole divine self into our human flesh. *"For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily"* (Col. 2:9).

He came to be the **Minister of Righteousness**, to serve us in His righteousness and to distribute His righteous acts to us. All the good He accomplished according to the holy Law, fulfilling its demands in full, He gives to us. He credits us with His perfect listening which covers over all the times we used our hearing to listen to what is false and wrong. He credits us with His perfect speaking which covers over all the times we used our mouths to speak what is untrue

and unkind. The life we have lived in our sin has been wrong in so many ways, and Jesus set us right again with the Father by His perfect life. And the debt we owed to God for breaking all His commands, Jesus paid it by shedding His holy blood on the cross.

So whether or not everything is all right for you or for me in our bodies and in the world, we are right with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. This is our confidence and this is our comfort when we suffer. Our suffering might not quickly go away, and it may be God's will that it does not go away as long as we live here. But He promises to keep touching us with His mercy and grace in both the good days and the bad ones.

He does not tire of coming to minister to us and serve us with His healing presence in the means of grace. He does not tire of encouraging us in our weakness. He does not tire of speaking His promises to us again and again, opening our ears and filling us with His righteousness and with His enduring peace. The people were right that Jesus *"has done all things well,"* but they didn't fully appreciate what *"all things"* meant.

Jesus *"has done all things well,"* all things right, because He *is* Righteousness. He is the Righteousness of God sent down from heaven to free us from our bondage to sin and death, and free us to hear His Word rightly and confess His truth clearly. In Him, we can be happy and content, even if not everything is right with our bodies on the outside or the inside. **Jesus, the Minister of Righteousness** is the one blessing we truly need.

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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