

Mark 7:24-37

Sometimes in our house one of us gets upset because the other responded to a question in a way that wasn't acceptable. Sometimes it evolves into a disagreement... what's the matter? How come you never seem to understand what I say? Don't you listen? Are you deaf? Well, yes actually, we are losing our hearing. But we are in good company. Jesus hung around with people who couldn't hear.

We heard of his healing a deaf man in today's gospel from Mark. The good news is that Jesus still hangs around deaf people. Even those who are able to hear. Martin Luther, in one of his sermons, said that all who refuse to hear the word of God are like the deaf man in the gospel lesson.

A lot of times we don't hear God's word. There's another miracle in today's gospel reading as well. Did you hear it? The Syrophenician woman came to ask Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus was trying to get some rest, trying to stay away from other people. The woman found him and begged for her daughter to be cured. It's a wonder Jesus even spoke to her. First off, a Jewish rabbi in the time of Jesus would never address a woman, that was a job for his disciples. And he especially would never have addressed a non-Jewish, a Gentile woman. Women were seen as second class residents, even by the Romans of the day. But Jesus broke the rabbinical law and told her that he came for God's people, not the dogs. As many times as I've heard this gospel reading, I still find those are shocking words to hear from Jesus. They're callous. They're rude. However, the woman wouldn't let it go at that. She insisted that the dogs ate the crumbs that fell from the table. Jesus was so impressed by her reply that he healed her daughter. So often we get caught off guard by hearing Jesus deny the woman's request and call anyone who isn't a Jew a dog, that we forget that her daughter was healed. Jesus healed a non-Jew, a young, female Gentile, someone who stood even lower on the societal totem pole than her mother.

Jesus cares about the outcasts in society. Jesus hangs out with the second-class members of society. We heard this in James 2:5b "Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?" Also in Psalm 146:7 "who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry."

The Syrophenician woman was of a very different social class than was Jesus and his Jewish followers. Even though her class and ethnicity was not supposed to be the focus of Jesus' ministry (it was God's plan to come for the Jews), Jesus opened himself to her request. How would we react if an obviously homeless person came in and sat down next to us? Would we be open to talking to the person? Would we acknowledge their presence? Would we be quick to see them escorted out?

We certainly have the opportunity to reach out to people who are in this position. There are so many homeless people in Erie. From what I can find there are nearly 1,100 homeless persons that we know of, about half of whom are in short-term housing like the City Mission, and about half who are living in encampments, behind buildings, under bridges. Even though we don't look for them, they are there. A report from Erie News Now highlighted the contrast of downtown Erie on a typical workday morning...the people who have laptop bags slung over their shoulders and coffee cups in their hands walking with a determination that indicates they have a destination among other men and women with ragged backpacks or tattered plastic bags, wearing layers of clothing, and a haunted, searching, look on their faces. There is little to no interaction between the two

groups. It is a visible example of the haves and the have nots. And it is undeniably typical in nearly every city in our American society. What causes this separation? Is it fear that keeps them from interacting? Fear that they may have to give something up? Fear that they may cause a scene? Fear of what other people may think? Yet the point made in today's gospel lesson is that God's gifts are for everyone.

What God gives the world is for everyone, even the poor. When Jesus healed the deaf man who was brought to him by his friends he took him to a place away from the crowds. We don't know why, but it must have been unusual or important for Mark to have recorded it. Jesus took this man to a private place, he wet his fingers with his own saliva and stuck them into the man's ears. I don't know about you, but I hate it when someone sticks their wet finger into my ear. This man probably wondered what on earth was Jesus doing. He may not have been able to communicate with Jesus. All he knew was that this stranger was taking him away from his friends. And then he wet his fingers with his spit and stuck them into the man's ears. A total stranger! I wonder if he squirmed? I wonder if he struggled? I wonder if he knew exactly what was going to happen? We don't know, we only know that Jesus isn't afraid to be among the outcasts of society. This man with his deafness and speech impediment was as much of an outcast of the Jewish society as was the Syrophenician woman, yet Jesus gave him what he needed.

In the area of the countryside where Jesus was traveling it was most likely this man was also a Gentile. Had the Syrophenician woman not broken the cultural barrier it is unlikely that Jesus would have given this man his hearing and speech. The man's friends brought him to Jesus with the hope he would be healed. Martin Luther also pointed out that the friends of the deaf man needed nothing. He writes, "This we may also learn here in these good people. They do not need the work themselves, nor do they look to themselves, but to the poor man, and think how they may help him; they seek no reward, but act independently and freely" (*Complete Sermons*, vol. 2/2, pp. 372-373). God's gifts truly are for all people!

Jesus performed two healings in today's gospel lesson. He continues healing to this very day. He opens the eyes of people just like us to the needs of others. He unstops the ears of people just like us so they can hear the good news of the gospel. He took people who are just like us and made them to be people who can do things differently. In the words of John Calvin, "He pours his energy into our tongues and pierces our ears with his fingers" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. XV1/2, p. 272). Martin Luther said, "The ears and tongues of Christians are thus different from the ears and tongues of the world. Or of unbelievers, caring naught for silver or gold, but only for that which is said of Christ and how to speak and teach of Jesus" (*Complete Sermons*, Vol. 2/2, p. 386). We have been given new ears and tongues, different from those of other human beings because our tongues and our actions now hold in them the energies of God. We are the hands and feet of Jesus. Our tongues, our arms, legs and hearts now by the grace of God have the ability to reach out to the poor, to those different from us, so that what God has given to everyone can be known by everyone.

Keep in mind that when Jesus gave the man in today's gospel lesson the ability to hear he also gave him the ability to speak. We too have been given the ability to speak. If not right now, someday God is going to use us to help implement God's work in making what God has done available to all. The miracle of healing, healing to enable us to bring this word to everybody, to care for everybody, has happened to us!

All glory be to God.