

SERMON
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Mark 7

They brought to [Jesus] a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

A few years ago I re-taught myself to swim. I am from a family of swimmers. My first swimming race was when I was four years old. 25 yards. There was a crowd of people cheering. I stopped half way over to look around—and everyone dove in to save me! I was so embarrassed! But I still have the whistle that the life guard gave me that day. My older brother and sister worked out, swam laps all through high school. To tell the truth, I didn’t like it much. *Pull! Pull! Pull! Kick harder. Kick harder!* My father would stand on the side shouting, “*Go all out!*” I wondered, “*Why?*” But a few years ago, someone told me about a new way of swimming called “Total Immersion.” I read the book and watched some videos—and got back in the pool. I started at the beginning. The author, a collegiate coach, studied the way a yacht cuts through the water. It is designed to move swiftly and smoothly, with ease through the water. He teaches that arms are only for pointing and feet are just to flutter. The real motion comes from the hips where the large motor muscles are. No pulling. No heavy kicking. One rotates from the core and glides. It’s amazing. And, you don’t get out of the pool exhausted but energized. Like a fish, you can swim forever. I’ll come back to this....

Ephphatha. “Be opened.” Hearing this word in today’s gospel lesson, “Ephphatha” made me think for a moment, to wonder—“How many Aramaic words are there in the Gospels?” I had a friend once who used to love to say he had a “working vocabulary” in Japanese and he would demonstrate by saying, with accent—“Nissan” and “Toyota.” Well, perhaps you didn’t realize that we have a “working vocabulary” in Aramaic. Mostly, it seems, from the Gospel of Mark. Ephphatha. “Be opened.” Check this out:

Talitha cum. “Little girl, get up.”

Abba. “Father.”

Raca. “Fool.”

Rabbouni. “Rabbi.”

“Eli, Eli. Lema sabbachthani. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Hosannah. “O Lord. Save us.”

Maranatha. “Lord, come!”

There are a handful of other words and names with Semitic origins but its not clear if they are strictly Aramaic or biblical Hebrew, such as “mammon,” “Bartholomew,” “Barrabas,” “Boanerges,” “Gethsemane,” and “Golgotha.” Pretty impressive “working vocabulary.” (But I wouldn’t put ‘Aramaic’ on your resume just yet.) To refresh your memory, the New Testament was written in Greek, what we have are translations with a few Aramaic words or phrases scattered here and there. It helps to remember that Jesus did not speak Greek, certainly not English, but an ancient language no longer spoken. Aramaic words included in the Gospels help to give the stories a more authentic sound, even for those who heard them first in Greek. The healing story from today’s gospel is perhaps a story meant to elaborate on the Aramaic phrase — “Be opened!” Ephphatha. All by itself, it is a word that *should* catch our attention. Perhaps this one word is the key to Jesus’ ministry. Here’s the scene that Mark builds. It is an intimate, personal moment. Away from the others, Jesus puts his fingers into the deaf man’s ears, and he spits and touches the man’s tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighs and says to him, “Ephphatha.” Mark translates, “Be opened.” Mark is, of course, fore-shadowing Christ’s call for all humankind to listen and to hear the Word of God and to response in faith. Pope Benedict wrote of this passage in 2012,

“There is an inner closing, which covers the deepest core of the person, what the Bible calls the “heart.” This is what Jesus came to ‘open,’ to liberate, to enable us to fully live our relationship with God and with others.”

The word “open” appears eight times in the New Testament. The first and second time are in the story of the blind man in Mark. Most uses are from *after* the resurrection: the eyes of the disciples on the road to Emmaus are *opened* to Jesus; they realize that the scriptures are *opened* to them; and a few verses later, Jesus *opens* the understanding of the disciples in Jerusalem to the scriptures. In Acts, the heart of a woman is *opened*. And, Paul, in Christ-like fashion, *opens* the scriptures in his ministry.

Ephphatha. Be opened. What might this mean for us? What might we understand about this kind of change in our lives, this healing? This is not just some story locked away in the gospel stories. It is meant for us, for humankind in every age. What might this healing look like and feel like for us? Is there anyone here that doesn’t want and/or need God’s touch of healing. The Gospel hymn today, from the Monks of Weston Priory, is our prayer:

“Spirit, be our spirit. In this time of searching for new life.
Open, inner spaces, with the fullness of your love.”

I sent out a picture in this week’s eBlast painted by a woman from Georgia, of a little girl in a bright orange dress. We see her only from the back as she looks out the window in the morning at two birds in a tree with her arms raised, opened, over her head. The artist titled the painting, “HOPE.” Every morning, we each need this kind of opening to the new day! “*Open inner spaces, with the fullness of your love.*”

Let me introduce a newer way to talk about the mission and ministry of Jesus. In 1990 a book was published called “*Flow.*” It is subtitled, “*The Psychology of Optimal Experience. Steps Toward Enhancing the Quality of Life.*” Here is a snippet of what the author calls “flow.”

*While happiness is sought for its own sake,
every other goal—health, beauty, money or power—
is valued only because we expect that it will make us happy.
Despite the fact that we are healthier and grow to be older...*

and that the least affluent among us are surrounded by material luxuries undreamed of even a few decades ago—people often end up feeling that their lives have been wasted,...and that their years were spent in anxiety and boredom.

What the author has discovered in twenty-five years of study is that happiness is NOT something that happens. It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but rather, on how we receive them, interpret and understand them. Happiness is a condition, cultivated, and prepared for. It is the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself. "The unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself." That's a lot to take in, but it is pictured in the open stance of that little girl at the window with her arms open and leading with her heart. The author is a scientist, so in the 240 pages plus notes and references, he has a lot more to say about the foundation and dynamics and cultivation of "flow" as a way of being in the world but which I equate closely with wholeness which Jesus' touch accomplishes in the healing stories of the gospels. "Flow" is not only finding purpose in life but requires a discipline and a dedication, a giving-over of oneself which accomplishes a complete focusing of attention—which, as a result, leaves no room for pain and anxiety and dissolution. For example, a dancer expresses the experience of "flow" in this way:

"A strong relaxation and calmness comes over me. I have no worries of failure. What a powerful and warm feeling it is! I want to expand, to hug the world. I feel enormous power to affect something of grace and beauty."

In faith-language, persons discover, accept and dedicate themselves with the needed discipline to become more of who God has intended them to be. It is not about success but about faithfulness. We are not called to be successful but to get lost in the flow of God within us and for us, and through us, for ourselves and for others. One of the most memorable lines in any film was in "Chariots of Fire." If you recall, in the 1924 Paris Olympics, Eric Liddell, a devout Christian born to Scottish missionaries in China is challenged by his family: "Why he is wasting his life as

a runner instead of coming come to do the work of the Church?” He answers:

*“I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast.
And when I run I feel His pleasure.”*

Flow is not about success but about *being open* to a radical, sometimes unpredictable discovery of what God has in mind for each of us—*Ephphatha*. “Be opened.”

Like re-learning to swim, perhaps we need to re-learn what it means to be faithful. Faithfulness is not a set of hard rules to follow. It does not mean that we need to learn to do things or be like someone else. Perhaps all faithfulness means is that we need to be open to discover what God is doing in and through each of us and to “go with the flow.” Faithfulness need not be painful but freeing, exhilarating! In this way, faithfulness is something we will want to do all the time because we feel *the pleasure of God* in our way of living. Faithfulness is to become more of who God has created us to be! *Ephphatha, Epiphany!* (That’s a mouthful!) Let us discover together what it means to be faithful. Let us support one another and encourage one another! *Come on in, the water’s fine!* May we each feel the pleasure of God as we learn to open ourselves and “go with the flow”—Go with God!

Amen