

## Ephphatha, Be Opened!

Sermon for the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Mark 7:31-37



<sup>31</sup> Then He returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> And taking him aside from the crowd privately, He put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. <sup>34</sup> And looking up to heaven, He sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” <sup>35</sup> And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. <sup>36</sup> And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more

*He charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. <sup>37</sup> And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”*

Most of the time, my grandpa was in a good mood and always had an interesting story to tell us children. But there were also times when grandpa wasn't well. That was mostly when lots of people came together. Then he was always silent and retreated into a corner or completely left the room so that we children always thought that he was in a bad mood. Later, I learned that my grandpa's bad mood had a reason. He actually had a hearing aid and when lots of people were in a room and almost everyone was talking at the same time, there was a terrible noise in his ears and he couldn't take part in the conversation anymore. He was isolated from the family because he couldn't hear. It is horrible to be cut off from society in this manner. You can clearly see that everyone is having lots of fun, but you can't share the joy. You are left out and alone. Everyone is happy and you are cut off from this joy. It must be even worse for people who can't hear anything at all. Because they can't even hear themselves, they can't hear their own voice either, so an indistinct babble comes out. We are learning about just such a person in our text for today. This man couldn't hear anything anymore and only expressed inarticulate words. And as such, he no longer belonged in society. The story that we read is easy to understand and relevant because we still know today how it is when an illness or disability can suddenly separate one from all other people. For example, some are already born with a disability and therefore can't participate in so-called normal life. Some people first get dementia when they are older or sick and must give up everything that represented their life and move into a nursing home where others must care for them. All these people have to go through what the deaf man, who we hear about in today's story, had to go through then. And now, he suddenly stood before Jesus. He probably didn't understand who this Jesus was and what He wanted from him. But in any case, his acquaintances knew what they wanted. They wanted Jesus. And they wanted Jesus because His name was “Healer.” And Jesus wasn't just a healer in name. He was known for that because He healed all kinds of diseases. And when it came to deaf-mute people, Jesus cared especially for them. The deaf-mute people were important to Jesus because they expressed all the miserable loneliness of humanity. Jesus often used the example of the deaf-mute person to illustrate the broken relationship between people and God. The deaf-mute person

has eyes and a mouth and yet can't use them. And similarly, we have eyes, ears, and all the other senses and we still can't hear God. Our ears are clogged so that we can't hear or understand God's voice and our mouth is mute because we have forgotten to talk with God. We don't know what it means to have a relationship with God. We also don't know what it means to believe. And now, there stood Jesus, the Healer, before this sick person and made it clear how He wanted to make everything new. At first, all His attention was on the sick person himself. But how should Jesus explain to the sick man what was wrong if he couldn't understand? In the story, we see that Jesus slowly breaks down the walls of non-communication. Initially so that only the sick man himself could understand what Jesus was about to do. Jesus therefore took him aside so that he wouldn't be distracted by a crowd of people. Then Jesus physically touched him because the sick man couldn't understand a single word. Jesus touched his ears and tongue and then looked to heaven. With these gestures, the deaf man had to understand exactly what was going on here. Jesus had taken hold of his problems with His own hands and looked to heaven, from where help was to be expected. And in this moment, this sick man best illustrated what it means to be a Christian, specifically to be in direct connection with Jesus. And this Jesus looks to heaven and connects us with God. The first words that this sick man then heard was the Aramaic word: "Ephphatha" which means: "be opened!" The Bible then reports that the deafness and inability to speak fell off like chains and all at once, this person was freed and could hear and understand everything and even join in conversations!

Jesus impressively showed with this healing that His attention is for the sick, the lonely, and those who are disconnected from God. Jesus's attention is for all people today who are still separated from God and others. Jesus's attention is especially for people throughout the whole world who are marginalized, for whose lives we see no more hope. Jesus especially pays attention to the Afghan people who face a great catastrophe here and now. For most of these people, there will be no way out. There will be no second option for them: either submit to the radical Islamism or die. We want to speak the words of Jesus over this situation: Ephphatha, "Heaven be opened! And let Your mercy rain over the people of Afghanistan!" And God wants that too. God doesn't want people to have to horribly die. God doesn't want people to be imprisoned, tortured, or oppressed by other people. God doesn't want people to be separated from society just because they are women. God also doesn't want people to get sick, to get old, and eventually die. In the beginning when God made creation, it all becomes clear: because God created people healthy and not sick. In this healthy condition, there was no separation, no lack of communication, no misunderstandings, no war. God and His people in a safe place and in active communication with one another. Every day. When Jesus came into the world, this heaven was illuminated once again. And people could see and recognize how God always wanted us! Through Jesus, people could again recognize heaven on earth.

By healing the sick, Jesus wants to make all of this clear to our eyes and ears. Jesus wants to show us that He is there for us. He wants to show us that God pays careful attention to us. Yet we are not in heaven. We still can only long for the new heaven and the new earth about which the prophets and the Revelation of John speak. But before us stands Jesus. Yet we can still only vaguely understand His words. There are many loud voices and war cries around us so that we often don't perceive the voice of Jesus in the commotion. But then Jesus takes us to the side. He takes hold of us. He comes to us personally. When we eat His body and blood at communion, the whole Jesus comes to us. And it flashes out these words: "Ephphatha. Be opened!" That happens every time we hear God's Word and His words reach our hearts. That also happens with our eyes. We can't see Jesus and don't know where He is and

how He can help us. But again and again there is a flash of who Jesus is and what He can do. No doubt in our world God and His work among us is often not recognizable. No doubt we often stand helpless and powerless before many challenges. How do I deal with suddenly experiencing suffering, illness, or separation from my loved ones? And what comfort can I give people who are in a hopeless situation? I don't have the answers. I don't know what to say to the people in Afghanistan who can't escape. I don't know what to say to the person who notices from one day to another how they are getting weaker and losing all the skills that are part of life. But one thing I can do, I can do just what the friend of the deaf-mute man did at Jesus' time. They did nothing other than bring their friend to Jesus. And this Jesus did nothing other than give all His attention and say: "Ephphatha. Be opened!" Amen.