

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Mark 7:31–37. In this passage we read the story of Jesus healing the deaf man who could barely speak. It is a significant moment of healing and contains several indications that it is also meant to be an instruction in discipleship. Let's study this passage to see what it has to offer us for our lives of faith.

One of the more interesting things to note about this passage is that it contains the word ephphatha that is preserved from the Aramaic language of Jesus. One of the only other times in Mark's Gospel that we have an Aramaic phrase is when Jesus heals Jairus' daughter with the expression talitha koum (Mk 5:41). Both of these scenes are important moments of discipleship and may have preserved actual words of Jesus due to their possible use in the early Church Baptismal rites. This interpretive key will now help us unlock this passage as an instructive moment with sacramental and discipleship significance. The first thing to note about discipleship is that Jesus takes the man away from the crowd by himself. This demonstrates the Lord's desire for us to spend time with Him in a privileged environment of communion, friendship, and formation in the Christian way of life. The distractions of ordinary daily life and the noise of the crowds can prevent us from being able to focus our attention on the Lord and to foster a relationship with Him. It can be intimidating and threatening to leave the comfortable world of our everyday social, professional, and familiar environment. However, Jesus can form us in faith, hope, and love most effectively when we enter into His world on His terms and leave behind the security and control of our own world. Such an experience of spending time with Jesus is the intended purpose of faith-based retreats, conferences, and pilgrimages. Sometimes it is much easier to stay in our own world rather than to accept the invitation to enter into the world of Jesus and possibly be changed by Him.

The second thing to note is that Jesus opens the man's ears so that he is able to both hear and speak clearly. On a level of discipleship, this two-fold healing has significant implications. The ability to articulate and profess faith is entirely dependent on how well we have heard the message of faith. We cannot communicate what we have not received and understood. This man is an image of all disciples who are not able to express clearly and readily their faith in Jesus. The source of this inability is usually due to their lack of knowledge. Disciples are responsible for seeking out opportunities to grow in their faith so that they can hear and understand the Word of God in its fullness. Only then can a disciple communicate to others that which they themselves have received. This hearing occurs through personal study, participation in the faith community, adult faith enrichment, and the prayerful study of Scripture. The final lesson of discipleship is the personal connection Jesus establishes with the man by placing His finger in his ear and touching his tongue. These gestures tell us that discipleship is not possible without a personal connection to Jesus Himself. The crowds may have heard about Jesus and even this man might have been told about Jesus, but he must be personally connected to the Lord in order to understand the Word of God (hearing) and to proclaim His faith (speaking). This important lesson reminds us that no matter how much we study or witness our faith, if we are not

personally connected to Jesus, our efforts can become empty and meaningless. Faith is first and foremost a relationship of trust in the Living God. What we learn may inform us about the Lord who is touching our lives, but it cannot replace that relationship or be a substitute for it. As disciples, it is important that we remain connected to Jesus each day so that we can hear His voice and proclaim His faith.

What are privileged environments of friendship, communion, and formation where you can experience Jesus in a focused and intense way?

How do disciples keep their ears open and attuned to the voice of Christ?

How do you know when you are becoming deaf to the voice of Christ?

What areas of your faith do you not understand well?

When do you find yourself unable to express your beliefs in discussions of faith with others?

How do you know when you are personally connected to Jesus, and what can you do to foster that personal connection more regularly?

As was mentioned in the previous reflection, some Scripture scholars believe that this passage contains elements of the early Church's Baptismal practices. It is interesting to note that the blessing of the ears and the mouth of a newly Baptized infant are still a part of our Baptismal rite today. The actual prayer says, "The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father." [1] This action of Jesus, then, has important sacramental significance for us. Sometimes parents perceive Baptism as an obligation to be completed in a half hour rather than a responsibility that takes a lifetime to be fulfilled.

Baptism isn't the completion of a disciple's journey of faith; rather, Baptism is the first step of that journey. The opening of the ears and the mouth are important symbols for what a life of full and mature discipleship will look like. The ears are symbols of how we receive the gift of faith. As Saint Paul tells us, "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" (Rom 10:14) Hearing, then, is a symbol of our ability to receive the gift of faith. The reality is that there are many obstacles that can prevent us from receiving and understanding the gift of faith. Some obstacles are internal while others are external. Internal obstacles include distractions, false beliefs, sinful practices, and prejudices. External obstacles include lack of religious formation, the absence of authentic Christian witnesses, inactivity of the family in the life of the Church, and a secular culture that promotes values that are hostile to faith.

When the ears of the newly Baptized are blessed, we are asking God to remove every obstacle, both internal and external, that would prevent the person from authentically and completely receiving the gift of faith. We are praying that their life will be "open" to receive Jesus in every possible way. This action of reception is somewhat passive, however, and is only half of what mature discipleship requires.

The other half of mature discipleship is that of active witness. The mouth is the vehicle of speech and as such is a means by which we actively profess and express our faith. The blessing of the mouth, then, asks the Lord to remove any obstacle that can prevent us from authentically and completely witnessing the faith we have received. Such obstacles can be internal or external.

Internal obstacles include fear of rejection or persecution, unfamiliarity with the language of faith, or trained passivity in the face of opportunity. External obstacles can include a hostile culture in the home, office, or larger society. When we are open to profess our faith, we will do so with competence, courage, and creativity. A mature disciple receives and professes completely and authentically a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

What are some of the internal and external obstacles that you have experienced in your desire to hear the message of faith?

What are some of the internal and external obstacles that you have experienced in your ability to express the message of faith?

What can a faith community do to help people become mature disciples who both hear and profess the gift of faith?

Another interesting thing to note about this passage is that of the actual healing. While there are various gestures and other actions associated with the experience of healing, it is quite clear that Jesus' Word is what caused the miraculous event. Scripture scholars note that actions such as the touching of ears, use of spittle, touching of the tongue, and groaning were used in parts of the ancient Gentile world by various healers. These elements may have been awkward for the early Church to explain and may account for the omission of these details in the Gospels Matthew and Luke. However, Jesus may have been trying to teach us something by the use of these gestures and actions. The Lord knew the cultural world of those whom He served and so He may have used these gestures and symbols as a means of inculturation. That means Jesus found a way to make the Gospel relevant to foreign cultures while preserving the power of His Word.

In doing so, Jesus used the same gestures employed by pagan healers so that people could understand His healing work, but then Jesus revealed that it was not those gestures that accomplished the healing, but rather His command. The cultural symbols served to engage our attention and lead us to an acceptance of the Lord's Word. Our world has cultures that are foreign to the world of Jesus as well. In order to present the Gospel in an intelligible way we must sometimes learn to carefully use the symbols and expressions of our contemporary cultures to lead people to better understand the work Jesus is trying to accomplish in their lives. However, the challenge is to use those symbols to express carefully and distinctly the unquestionable power of Jesus' Word. Not all symbols and expressions of contemporary culture are compatible with Christianity, but those that are compatible may be used to appropriately facilitate the proclamation of the Gospel. The Church is constantly called to proclaim the message of the Gospel in a relevant and effective way. The example of Jesus in this passage challenges us to be creative, courageous, and discerning in how that proclamation takes place today.

For what cultures today does the message of faith need to become more relevant?

How can inculturation sometimes end up distracting and distorting the message of faith?

What principles should guide authentic, faithful and effective inculturation of the Gospel?

How do you know when a message has become focused more on the culture than the Gospel?

The passage ends with Jesus instructing the crowd not to tell anyone about the healing. However, they then go out and proclaim the event. The implication is that the man shared in the action of

the crowd. It is ironic that Jesus opened the man's ears so that he could hear clearly but then the man does not obey what he hears our Lord telling him. Jesus has power to control the forces of nature, disease, and evil spirits, but the Lord respects our free will and does not force us to do His will. Rather, the Lord opens our ears to hear Him and asks us to willingly cooperate with His will, especially when it conflicts with our own desires. Disciples are called to be obedient to God's will and to do what God wants rather than what they want. It is in our obedience that the gift of faith reaches perfection and we use the gifts God has given us according to the Lord's intention.

How does this teaching invite you to reconsider your use of the Lord's blessings in your life?

In what area of life do we tend to be most resistant to following God's will by doing our own will instead?

How do you dispose yourself to know God's will?

Lastly, it is worth noting that this entire healing takes place because the crowds brought the deaf man to Jesus and asked the Lord to lay His hand on him. This man was fortunate to have a community that cared enough to bring him to Jesus as the Lord drew near. The man himself may have had no idea who Jesus was or the change that Jesus could effect in his life. The crowds did know those things and so they took initiative in facilitating this encounter with the Lord. There are many people today who do not know Jesus, their need for Jesus, or the effect the Lord can have in their lives. This passage encourages us to be part of the faithful crowd that brings others to the Lord so the Lord can make them His own and share with them the power of His Word. This initiative requires that we are open and hospitable as a faith community and that we are inviting towards those who are not currently active members of our church. It also means that we look around at the people we encounter every day and consider how Jesus desires to touch their lives. They may never meet the Lord if we do not invite them to come with us when we go meet the Lord. Remember: The man in this story would have never come to Jesus had it not been for the crowd. Jesus wants us to use our gift of speech to invite others so they can share in what we are already experiencing. The gift of faith and discipleship is deeply personal but never intended to be kept private.

What are opportunities or ministries to which you can invite people so they can become familiar with the Lord?

What does an open and hospitable faith community look like?

What does a closed and inhospitable faith community look like?

Who has been placed in your life and needs to meet the Lord, but they aren't aware of their need or don't know how to meet Him?

Who introduced you to Jesus?