

Mark 7.31-37  
12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
3 September 2017  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

*Oremus: sint placentes sermones oris mei, meditatio cordis nostri in conspectu tuo, Domine fortitudo mea et redemptor meus.* Ps. 19.14 [19.15 ~~¶~~ iuxta hebr. alt.]

It's Reformation 500 year so it's a good year and time to talk a little about Lutheran history.

Today I want to take you back to the year 1580, to the Margraviate of Brandenburg—the area around Berlin and generally in Northeastern Germany.

By 1580 the Reformation had settled in very well there. Brandenburg had come over to the Reformation already in Luther's time, in 1539.

Now, let's enter one of the churches in Brandenburg. Maybe some of you might have even had ancestors there that morning. There's a Baptism this morning there. And the pastor is using the standard Baptism order. First comes the exorcism. The priest blows into the nose of the baby and then extends his hand over the baby and cries out, "Depart, you unclean spirit, and make room for the Holy Spirit." As we still do today. A sure mark you're in a Lutheran church and not a Protestant church. Because the whole world and all flesh born in the natural way is under the sway and rule of the devil. A confession of the sin, evil, and captivity into which we are all born.

Next he reaches to a little salt cellar and grabs a pinch of salt and places it in the baby's mouth to recall the Lord healing the waters around Jericho, barren for its poor water (2 Kings 2.19-22). For by Baptism the baby is made a tree planted by living waters, whose leaf does not wither (Psalm 1).

And then comes the spit. Yes. The spit. The priest spits on his fingers, touches them to the baby's tongue. And he does that he exclaims over the baby, "Ephphatha! Be opened!" For the baby is just as deaf and "difficult of speech" as the man in today's Gospel.

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The deaf man in the Gospel—we don't know how long he'd been in his condition. Perhaps his whole life. It doesn't matter. Nor do we know much about this man at all. We know where he was from. The Decapolis, that half-Jewish, half-Gentile region to the north of Palestine. But Jesus still healed him. Because He's the Lord and Savior of all—the Jew first and also the Gentile.

Mark doesn't even mention the deaf man's name. He surely had one. And when Mark did his interviews about this event all the people who stood there astonished when it happened no doubt told him exactly who the man was and where to find him. But to tell the name is to overparticularize what Jesus did. Jesus did what He did for the deaf man. Certainly. But the deaf man remains nameless and must remain nameless. Because the important point isn't that Jesus did it for *this* deaf man, but that in doing it for this deaf man He did it for you.

For you, too, no less than this deaf man and hard of speech, no less than the baby back in Brandenburg in 1580, were born deaf and hard of speech. Deaf to God's Holy Word. Deaf to God's promises in Christ. Deaf to God's continuous self-disclosure as the God who gives Himself to you. Deaf to God's kind and fatherly heart, who not only gives you your body and soul, eyes, ears, and all your members, your reason and all your sense, *but still takes care of them!* Instead your only consciousness was that you were all alone. Helpless. The plaything of an inscrutable God. And if you didn't scream for mother's milk, you were dead; because there was no kind, merciful, fatherly God to see to it that you got fed.

And for that very reason—for the reason of the deafness—also hard of speech. Let's go back to the baby's scream. It's not just a biological reflex.

Or rather, today it *is* a biological reflex. The only reflex that creatures cut off from God by sin can give. It's all the mouth can utter in the face of its deafness to God. Because it's unable to know the God and Father of us all, it's unable to confess the God and Father of us all and His goodness and mercy trusting in Him for daily bread.

Because it doesn't know Jesus Christ, God's own Son, it's unable to confess that Jesus Christ, God's own Son, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary is your *Lord*. Your *Lord* by redeeming you from sin, death, and the devil's power. And not cheaply. With money. But with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.

And because it knows nothing of the Holy Spirit who works through Word and Sacrament it's unable to confess that you cannot by your own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ your Lord or come to Him, but the *Holy Spirit* has called you by the Gospel and enlightened with His gifts.

In short, it's unable to confess that God is the dear Creator and you the dearly loved creature; that He is the Redeemer and you the redeemed; that He is the Sanctifier, the Holy-Maker, and you the sinner.

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Perhaps you still find yourself in that same situation. Despairing of the Lord's mercy to you. Diffident of His providential care for every need of body and soul. Wondering why things have had to go for you as they have. Depressed over your life. And more depressed when you think about how it will end. Finding yourself unable to embrace God's promises in Christ. Or just the opposite. Quite convinced that you must master your own destiny. And can. That if you're a good enough person, God will look kindly on you. In short, that with control like that over God, in the end there's no God but yourself.

All of which can't but lead to a tongue that is "hard of speech," to a tongue twisted around its own lies. Suffering like this unnamed man with delusions and disillusionment. And without hope. Without hope to change how we are. Without hope to teach ourselves different words. Without hope of ever speaking the excellencies of God. In short, without God Himself.

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That's why this story from the Gospels is such a comfort to us. Because, fellow-redeemed, you can't. You can't get it straight. You can't muster up the right thinking and the straight tongue. You can't open your own ears, deaf as they are.

Only God can and only God must.

And that's just exactly what Jesus does today. In this very moment. Within the space of this one hour we call the Divine Service—the service in which God comes to serve *us*.

With no less compassion than He had for the blind man, He comes to you. Does He not? And then He works on you the same way He did back then. With a Word. With His own creative, powerful, and performative Word. With His own Word that gives the power to hear it that it demands and requires. And He says over you, “Ephphatha. Be opened!” Isn't this what happens the entire Divine Service? You come with sins you cannot escape, and what does Jesus do? He speaks His Word. And His Word offers and delivers and gives what you in your sin can never achieve—their forgiveness. Just as the ears were opened because He said so, so are your sins forgiven. You come with doubts and difficulties, and what does Jesus do? He touches your tongue. In no less real way than He touched the deaf man's tongue. He lays His body on it. And He says, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” And it is so. Because Jesus Himself says it.

And you can't be despairing of that. You can't be diffident in that. You can't wonder about that. You can't be depressed about that. You can't even say, “This doesn't belong to me.” Why? Because Christ Himself has spoken it. Christ Himself has put it on your tongue. And if He has done it, it doesn't matter what you think. It is so. And He does it to you and for you in all earnest. With no less earnestness than He had when shouted out, “Ephphatha! Be opened!” And it was so.

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But back to Brandenburg. I know you think it's probably a little gross. But wouldn't it be great to restore the rite of the spit? Wouldn't it graphically demonstrate what Baptism does? Wouldn't it remind us every time we witnessed a Baptism of the power of Christ's Word? That it opens ears deaf to God's promises in Christ and loosens tongues twisted by half-truths and lies about oneself and, more importantly, about *God*.

As indeed it does. For the water combined with God's Word and taken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the Spirit's *Ephphatha*. It's a washing of new birth. Of another birth. Of a birth not of the flesh, but of the Spirit.

Nor is it a one-time event. It continues. For whenever Jesus comes into your midst He comes with His Word. That's the only way He ever comes, in fact. And through that Word He's constantly and continually doing for you what He did for the nameless deaf man back in the Decapolis—breathing back into humans who had lost Him the Spirit of Life, the Lord and Giver of Life. Making living tongues and ears of dead ones and loosens them. Making of the unwilling willing. Giving hope to the hopeless. Confidence to the diffident. And forgiveness of sins to sinners.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*pax dei, etc.*

*sdg*  
*jsb*