

Mark 7:31-37

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.

After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "*Ephphatha!*" (which means, "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

What makes you an individual? What sets you apart from other people? What makes you *you*? Usually if we have to answer that question, we start to think about the special gifts that God has given us, our unique talents and abilities, or the skills I've learned that other people might not have, or maybe an unusual hobby or interest of ours. If we're describing what makes us unique, usually we think of the good things about us, don't we?

It's harder to think of our flaws as making us unique, because we think of individuality as a good thing—it's good to be your own person. But we certainly don't think of our flaws as being good—we don't want other people to know about them, we want to hide them away, so that when it comes to the bad things about us, we would prefer to be just like everyone else.

But the truth is, our bad things—whether they are disabilities or personal troubles or outright sins—they do set us apart, don't they? They separate us and isolate us from other people who don't experience these same things that we do. This man that Jesus heals in our gospel lesson today knew exactly what that was like. He had a problem that, by its very nature, it isolated him. It separated him and cut him off from everyone around him.

But Jesus fixed that. For most of his ministry, Jesus focused on the people of Israel in the area of Galilee, with a couple of trips south to Jerusalem for Passover. As we read our gospel lesson today, Jesus has taken a trip outside of Galilee—but he's gone *east*. He has gone outside Israel and has been ministering to the Gentiles living there.

He enters into the region known as the Decapolis, the region of the Ten Cities. These were a collection of ten cities that were founded as colonies of the Roman Empire. So most of the people living there were not Jews; they were Romans or Greeks who had moved there to make a life for themselves.

But even though these people weren't Jews, they all knew who Jesus was. They had undoubtedly heard the news of his miracles, and they knew that he could heal the sick just by laying his hand on them. Even though they had never seen Jesus, they all knew him—all of them, that is, except one.

There was one person who had never heard of Jesus, never heard of his works, never even heard his name. He was deaf, probably had been for most of his life, because he was hardly able to speak. When everyone else was talking about Jesus and what he could do, when everyone else was excited to hear that he was coming, this deaf man didn't know anything about it. Because back in Jesus' day, they didn't have sign language like they do now, and it's unlikely that this man would have been able to read.

So when the people decided to bring this man to Jesus, he probably had no idea what was even going on. Jesus understood that this man needed special attention. He needed something more. So Jesus takes this man aside. Instead of standing there with all those people watching while he works his miracle, he takes the man away from the crowd. He wants to work with him *personally*.

Now Jesus can't just talk to the man and tell him what he's going to do. Jesus needs to communicate with him in a way that he will understand. He begins by placing his fingers in the man's ears, indicating to him that he's going to open them to hear. He spits and touches the man's tongue, showing him that he's going to loosen it to speak. He looks up to heaven, showing the man the source of this miracle—he wants the man to know that he's not just some traveling doctor or a trickster pretending to have magic healing powers. He has come from heaven, and this miracle is coming from God himself.

So finally, Jesus takes a deep breath, and with a deep sigh he says, "*Ephphatha!*" the Aramaic word meaning, "Be opened!" And immediately, the man is able to hear, and more than that, he's able to understand what people say to him, and he's able to speak perfectly! Once, his disability had separated him from his family and everyone around him; but Jesus addressed his individual needs. He tailored his approach specifically to this man, and he tore down the walls around him.

Each one of us has his or her own individual needs. We all have bad things about us that separate us from those around us. For some of us, it's a disability like that deaf man had. Maybe it's a physical disability or a mental one, but in one way or another, we simply don't function the same way everyone else does. But what's really troubling is that most people just don't get it. They just don't understand what it's like to have some ability removed, to not be able to hear or speak properly, to see properly, to walk properly. They don't understand what it's like to experience crippling pain every day. They don't understand what it's like to have an illness that will eventually kill me. They don't understand what it's like to suffer from chronic depression or anxiety so much that you can't even get out of bed in the morning. And if they don't understand this problem that I am having, this thing that is a part of who I am, then how can they possibly understand me?

These things separate us from one another. Our personal problems, whatever they may be, cut us off from the people who just don't understand. But what's even worse is that, so often, our own lack of understanding cuts us off from the people around us who have problems of their own. It's not just our problems themselves that separate us—many times, it's our lack of interest in the troubles of others.

You want to talk about something that divides, that separates, something that causes rifts in relationships and drives people apart? Let's talk about sin! Sin really is the great divider, isn't it? When we sin against other people, we harm them. We prove to them that they can't trust us. We cause a rift.

But even if we commit sins that aren't against other people, that don't harm others, sins that only we know about, those sins divide us from others too! Because I start feeling guilty about those sins, and I try to hide those sins away so that nobody else will know about them. And because I'm ashamed of this sin or that temptation, and because I hide it, it's all too easy for me to start thinking that I'm the only one. I'm the only one who feels this temptation, I'm the only who struggles with it. I'm alone, and I have to do it by myself. I start to worry: "What if they *do* find out? What will they say? What will they think of me if they ever discover that *I* am the one who does *this*? Who did *that*?"

Yes, sin separates us from one another. It builds walls and burns bridges and it threatens to destroy the spirit of unity that God has given us in Jesus. But even though our individual sins and our individual needs make us feel very much alone, Jesus knows us. He knows exactly what we need. And he is uniquely suited to address our individual needs as no one else can!

When Jesus healed that deaf man, he reached out to him. He met him where he was, and he didn't just heal him as though he were one more sick person. He treated him as an individual with individual needs. And he did that for every single person that he dealt with, and he does it for every single one of us!

You want to talk about those sins that divide and isolate? Jesus has forgiven them all! And it's more than that—Jesus hasn't just forgiven *all* our sins. He's forgiven each of them, every individual sin we've ever done or ever will do, every single one of them—yes, even *that one*! If Jesus knows us, if he knows every sin we've committed, even the ones we ourselves do not, then he knew how to take those sins away.

Look at him upon his cross, hear his groaning, and see how each of your sins is nailed there with him. See here, here is that lustful thought; there is that unkind word. Here are the wasted hours, the petty bickering, the proud indifference to the needs of others. They're all here, each and every one of them. And there they have stayed, there in the grave. When Jesus rose again, our sins did not follow. Not one of them cries out against us, for Jesus truly has done all things well.

Jesus doesn't just stop at taking away our individual sins, either. He addresses each of our individual needs too, those problems we have that aren't necessarily sinful, but that do cause us pain, discomfort, worry. All those issues we suffer that, even if nobody else understands what it's like, Jesus does. In every single thing, Jesus has the power to give individual comfort to each of us. He can do that through any number of things: the proclamation of his Word, the celebration of his sacraments, the encouragement of our fellow Christians.

Is it persistent pain or illness you face? "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." Is it heartache and distress? "The Lord, the Lord, is your strength and your song; he has become your salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Is it temptation that you have not been able to overcome? "Do not fear," Jesus says, "for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

Jesus has called each of us by name, he has opened our ears that were closed in sin and he has made us to hear his voice. He knows you and me so well, and he gives each one of us exactly what we need. Amen.