

23rd Sunday OT
Mark 7:31-37

Jesus was traveling in a great circle to the sea of Galilee and passed through the **Gentile Decapolis region**. There he met a man who suffered from deafness and defective speech. He took him aside, put his fingers into his ears, touched his tongue, looked up to heaven and prayed, “Be opened.” The cure was successful. The man’s ears and tongue did what God intended them to do.

Mark’s reader of Jewish background would recognize in Jesus’ activities a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. The Kingdom of God, the Subject of the preaching of Jesus, was dawning. It was all part of his messianic work. **A Gentile reader** would rejoice because the cures that so far in Mark’s story had only been available to Jews, were being offered to Gentiles.

But **Mark wants his reader** to think beyond physical healing. In the parable, Jesus had called for those with ears to hear. Many failed to listen. Pharisees plotted to destroy him, his family thought him mad, scribes thought him in league with Beelzebub. Many suffered from speech defects that prevented them from responding to his summons to repent and believe and lacked a tongue to confess his identity. **Their lips, not their hearts, gave him honor**. Even after the miracle, the crowds disobeyed Jesus’ command to keep quiet about it. With defective speech, they proclaimed Jesus as a miracle worker, not as the Christ, the Son of God who had to suffer, die, and rise again.

Mark’s readers could identify with the man who was cured. Like him, they lived in Gentile territory and in their baptism, they had received enlightenment, hearing the word Ephphatha – Be opened.

It is important again to remind ourselves, who was the audience that Mark was writing to?

He was writing to the people of Rome, **a mixed crowd of Jews and Gentiles**. Most of the information and stories Mark gathered about Jesus was from Peter who was in Rome at the time. Therefore, the audience of Mark’s gospel were both Jews and Gentiles. That is why Jesus travels to both Jewish and Gentile territories. For example, there are two miracles like the multiplication of the loaves, one in Jewish

land of 5000 people and the other in Gentile land of 4000 people. Today's miracle of the healing of the deaf man is in Gentile land. There will be a healing in Jewish territory with an interesting twist to the story, but we will save that for another time. The important point is that **Mark is writing to us**, non-Jews. And as a footnote, the Gentiles were more receptive to the Word of God through Jesus, than the Jews, and would have been more receptive of this Gospel, the first to be written, that included the Gentiles.

The important point pointed out by a recent commentator on this gospel, is that it comes during this second wave of the pandemic where **touch** can only safely occur with plastic covered hands. And I quote: "For over a year, many people went without consistent, physical touch, a necessary but painful measure to help minimize the spread of Covid-19," from Jaime Waters from DePaul University in Chicago. She continues, "As we re-emerge and return to some sense of normalcy, many of us are able to reconnect physically and reap the benefits of touch...God's touch is also central to today's Gospel. A community brings a man to Jesus in search of healing. The man is unable to hear and has difficulty speaking. At this point in Mark, Jesus has performed several healings and miraculous acts, and some are public. Although the crowd initiates today's healing, Jesus restores the man in private in a very personal manner.

There are many ways we can touch people safely, even in this time of Covid-19. First of all, by our **words**. "I was touched by your kind words." Another is by our looks or even posture. Body language is our most primitive and basic way of communicating. Many people are literally DEAF when it comes to reading these signals and also unaware of the signals that they are giving to others themselves, as when they move suddenly back from certain people or even cross to the other side of the street. However, a simple **smile** speaks volumes. There is a hand wave, the peace sign, and other gestures with the hand. It is interesting the many ways people give the sign of peace at the Eucharist without touching.

It was only after the Second Vatican Council that a peace sign was encouraged at the Eucharist. And yet I am sure Jesus didn't confine his hugs to just children. The gospel reminds us today that our faith can be expressed in many ways other than verbal language and how important touch is to us humans. ('air' hand shake, a wave of the hand, peace sign, blow a kiss, bow.)