

Homily – September 8th, 2024 – 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time



Once again the Scriptures give us a wicked piece of humour. You may have picked up on it. Jesus encounters a man who was not able to speak, he heals the man of his muteness, and immediately proceeds tells him to shut up and not tell anyone what just

happened.

The people in Biblical times were not Scripture scholars any more than we are. Yet, those who experienced Jesus opening the ears and mouth of this deaf and mute man, on that particular day, would have seen it as the fulfillment of Isaiah, our first reading. The prophet Isaiah lived some 600 years before the birth of Jesus, and God told Isaiah to tell the people, ***“the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy”*** (Is. 35:5-6).

The Jewish people in Isaiah’s time lost everything when they were deported to Babylon. Unfortunately, we’ve learned very little from history. In 1755 the Acadians were deported from Grand Pré and other places in the Maritimes. They lost everything but held onto their faith that someday they would leap like the deer and their tongues would no longer be mute but they would be able to sing for joy in French.

We did the same thing with our own Indigenous people. We induced deafness all with the intention that we were doing them a favor, after all we assumed we knew what was best for everyone.

The best way to conquer a person, a group, or even a nation is to first induce deafness. If someone can’t hear, very soon afterwards they won’t be able to talk. Deafness and muteness are always connected. If you can’t hear, how are you able to formulate words? We all have the unfortunate ability to induce

deafness. We have all cut people off and not listened to them in favor of our own words and our own opinions.

We Irish, not to keep rehashing the pain of the past, were suppressed by the English not all that long ago. The Celtic language was suppressed. Take away a people's language and their ability to hear their native language and soon you have a deaf people. Deafness leads to muteness. If you don't hear, see, or experience your own language and culture, it's not long before you can't express it yourself. And if you can't express it yourself, you have nothing to pass on to the next generation. Suppression leads to deafness, deafness leads to forgetfulness, and forgetfulness leads to muteness. You have now conquered a people without firing a single bullet.

Jesus opened the ears of the man who was deaf. The suppression this man felt his whole life was gone. With the man's ears open, it didn't take long for the man to be able to speak. We are told ***his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly***. Although Jesus told him not to say anything about it, he couldn't contain his joy. He was like the deer in Isaiah that leaps for joy. The joy in this man was stronger than his ability to remain silent. This is Easter joy. This is a glimpse of Jesus' resurrection and the joy that comes when death is defeated and life is victorious.

There is more to hearing than simply not being physically deaf anymore. In the Biblical sense, hearing means being open. Isn't that the greatest gift we can give to another person, to just be open to hearing their truth? Isn't that the greatest gift we can give to God, our openness to God's word a word that can transform our lives and the life of the world? This is what Jesus delights in—openness. It doesn't matter where he find openness, Jesus delights in it. He didn't find a whole lot of openness in the leaders of his own Jewish faith. In the gospels, Jesus praises way more Gentiles (non-Jews) for their openness and faith than he praises Jews. If there is openness in just one person in the crowd, Jesus sticks around in the hopes that there might be openness in a second. But, when there are only closed minds and closed hearts, he moves on to another town. He has better things to do than to waste his time with people who are closed in on themselves.

We never get to know the name of the man who was deaf and mute. This is a literary device; it's done deliberately that way. Whenever we don't get the name of a person in Scripture, which is almost always the case, it means the story isn't their particular story but is ours. The deaf man is anonymous which means the story transcends this man's particular life. If we were given his name, we would make the mistake of thinking this is simply his story, and all we could say to that would be, "Good for you. I'm glad you experienced Jesus healing in your life. But what about me and my struggles?"

This is also a healing story where truth is spoken to power. It's interesting that Jesus initiates this encounter by first putting his fingers in the man's ears. He's already deaf and now Jesus is blocking his ears even more. In order for this man to hear the truth, which only God can give us, he must first block out the world of lies. "Ephphatha," or "Be opened" is not addressed to this man's ears. It is a command to the heart to open to the love of God. Remember when Jesus was baptized, something opened. Jesus heard the words of truth, "You are my beloved," the heavens opened and the Spirit descended and filled Jesus' heart. The words from the outer world, even the praise Jesus got from the "miracle mongers" meant nothing to him. He, too, had to learn to block his own ears from lies and open to the ear of his heart to the truth that he was God's beloved and nothing could ever change that.

Jesus uses his own saliva to touch the tongue of the mute man. Have you ever spoken publicly and, because of nerves, your mouth went dry? You were speaking from the lips only. Maybe you felt out of your league speaking on a topic you weren't really comfortable with. Or, perhaps the size of the crowd before you made you feel overwhelmed. Hopefully you also had an experience of public speaking where you were full of confidence and the words just flowed not from your lips but from a much deeper level within you. You didn't dry out. Spit, which Jesus uses, comes from inside and symbolizes the Spirit. The Spirit in Jesus, the Spirit he received at his own baptism, is uniting with the man's spirit. By blocking the man's ears initially, Jesus is telling the man, "Stop listening to lies. Stop listening to the voices that say you are not enough, you will never make anything of your life, or that your life doesn't matter to anyone."

By using spit on the man's tongue, deep is calling on deep, truth is calling on truth, the beloved son that Jesus is, is calling on the beloved son that this man is.

Maybe it wasn't only this man's ears that were opened. I suspect something opened in the hearts of the crowd as well. They had to tell others. The joy was stronger than their ability to remain silent. If it's true of Jesus, and if it's true of this anonymous man, it's also true of you. You are God's beloved son/daughter. Open to that truth and the heavens themselves will open and rejoice with you.

~Fr. Phil