

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³² 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.

³³ 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. ³⁴ He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!"). ³⁵ At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

³⁶ Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷ People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." (Mark 7:31-37)

Jesus Has the Power to Heal

The gospel lesson we have before us this morning is somewhat meaningful to me personally. You see, when I was five, I temporarily lost my hearing. I had fluid build up behind my ears and I can remember walking around our house feeling like I was in this big bubble. By God's grace, the doctor took out my tonsils, the fluid drained away and my hearing came back. But ever since then, I can only just barely pass hearing tests. Now that I'm in my fifties, it definitely feels worse than it used to. My poor wife has to repeat herself and even sometimes tell me what other people said. So sometimes I wish Jesus would stick his fingers in my ears and say, "Be opened!" like he did for this man. But then I have to remember that if I have a hearing loss, it's pretty minor. I don't need the kind of miracle this man did. There are many, many Christians on earth today who fervently pray for this kind of miracle and for most of them, God's answer is, "No, trust me that this is what's best for you." But on one special day two thousand years ago, Jesus did stick his fingers into a man's ears and sigh and speak an Aramaic word that means "Be opened" and suddenly that man could hear and speak. That miracle teaches us something important today: **Jesus has the power to heal.**

I.

There is a basic lesson that every one of Jesus' miracles teaches: he is the Son of God. This man was deaf and in a moment Jesus healed him. He didn't need surgery or cochlear implants or hearing aides. Jesus touched him and spoke and it was like the man had never been deaf. Only the Son of God has power like that. But God's power can be used in more than one way. On Judgment Day, God is going to use his power to hurl untold billions of sinners into hell. His power will be terrifying. But that's not how Jesus used it on this day. He used it for an act of compassion. And in the very last verse of our reading Mark says, **"People were overwhelmed with amazement. 'He has done everything well,' they said. 'He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.'"** Don't those words sound almost like our Old Testament lesson for today? Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would unstop the ears of the deaf and cause the tongues of the mute to sing for joy. This miracle was a sign that the Savior had come.

Look where it took place: the Decapolis. What is that? It's not on most modern maps. But it's across the Jordan from Israel. It was originally an alliance of ten Greek cities-states. While there were certainly Jews living in those cities, the majority would've been Gentiles. Jesus did this miracle to show those strangers to the true God, who he was. And there in that Gentile area, the people already knew that Jesus had the power to heal. So they came to him. But Jesus wasn't interested in magic tricks. And he wasn't really interested in social ministry. His miracle was designed to underline the message he came to proclaim: that he was the promised Savior, the only hope for sinners. In him, all the problems of this life are solved because every problem that we face here comes from sin. This world is broken. We get sick. We hurt. We die because of sin. But Jesus is God's plan to rescue us from all that and to give us a new and better life in a new and perfect world.

But you know what? Every human being – except for Jesus himself – is born deaf to that message, deaf to God's purposes, deaf to God's love. We don't know or understand what he has planned for us and we don't want to. We think we're doing just fine, thank you very much. When we do struggle with the hardships of life on this earth, the sinful human heart either figures that I'm smart enough and strong enough to solve these problems or it wallows in how unfair life is and how I deserve better. Do you see what those two approaches

have in common? There're all about me. They show the sinful human pride that we were born with, the pride that wants nothing to do with a Savior who simply rescues us. In the end, our sinful hearts just don't think it makes any sense for God to send his Son and bail us out.

But that's what God did. Jesus healed a man of physical deafness so that he could heal everyone who heard about it of spiritual deafness. That was the real purpose here. And it takes a miracle of his power to break through that sinful human pride. But it wasn't the miracle of the physical healing that broke through that crust of sin on our hearts. The real power was in the gospel, in the message that the Savior had come. Jesus used miracles to get a hearing for that gospel message. Then through that power, he punched a hole in the crust of sin and reached into our hearts and made them new. He gave them faith. He taught them to trust in him.

Today, he doesn't do the kinds of miracles that he did then. I've often wished he would. I can't count the number of times I've walked through hospitals and nursing homes, and visited people at home who simply couldn't get to church anymore, and wished that I could simply lay my hands on them and make them physically well. But that's not God's plan for them. And many times, I've wished that I had a red phone that I could use to call God and ask him why a particular Christian has to go through cancer or heart disease or deafness. But he didn't give me a red phone. What I have is his promise in the Bible. What I have is his teaching that he does all things for our good and that our number one good is reaching eternal life. He tells us that he uses every hardship we face to purify our faith. So even when he doesn't do a miracle we can see, God is still working to bring us his word. Through that word he does a miracle. He strengthens our faith. He breaks through the spiritual deafness every one of us was born with. **Jesus has the power to heal. He heals our ears to hear.** Then he fills them with his message of love.

II.

Of course, there were two parts to the miracle. Not only did Jesus give this man the ability to hear. He also enabled him to speak. Now, he wasn't completely mute. The NIV says "he could hardly talk." But in an instant, our Savior showed his power over all that sin does to us and he enabled this man to speak clearly, probably for the first time in his life. Again, that shows not just his power, but his love, the very love that drove him to the cross so that all of us will live.

So Mark tells us that he began to speak. He doesn't tell us what he said. But in a number of other cases, when Jesus healed someone, they praised God and told everyone they met what Jesus did for them. Mark does tell us that it's what everyone else was saying. In fact, Jesus went so far as to tell them not to speak. Why? Because it wasn't time yet. Jesus was soon going to begin his long, final trip to Jerusalem and die and rise. Forty days after that, he was going to command his church to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. But he had not yet given that command. While he did send his disciples out more than once to preach, the crowds of people gathering just to see a miracle or just to get healed actually made it harder for him to do his real ministry, preaching and teaching that their Savior had come.

But Mark says that the more Jesus commanded them not to speak, the more they keep talking. They were so excited about what it meant to know Jesus and to see him in action. It's too bad that we don't get to see these miracles, isn't it? In one sense, I suppose it is. I've always wanted to see the kinds of miracles Jesus did. But, my friends, there was also something unwholesome about the focus just on miracles. They could also be a distraction from the message. And the truth is, we have a greater miracle to talk about than physical healing. While it is true that God does answer prayers and I can tell you stories of him doing things that no one would have believed possible, the real miracle in the life of Christ is the love of God that saves us.

The truth is, this man that Jesus healed still had to die. While that does not diminish what Jesus did for him, it does put it in perspective. Every time Jesus fed the multitudes or healed the sick, he was solving a very real problem for this life. But he was also calling them to see the deeper and greater miracle: the Son of God descended from heaven and took on a real human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary. From eternity, God planned and controlled human history so that that baby would be born in Bethlehem and die outside Jerusalem. During his life, that God-man kept God's laws for all of us and then he died and paid for all our sins. Then he rose so that we can hear God's not guilty verdict in his courtroom. He rose so that we will rise from the dead and live in a world where there are no deaf people, where there is no sickness or sorrow or pain or death, where no one needs to be comforted anymore, because God has wiped every tear from our eyes and given us a world where we live with him and with each other in perfect love forever.

That miracle does a miracle in our hearts. It opens our lips to talk about our Savior. My friends, do you find it hard to talk about Jesus? How many times in your life have you spoken about him to someone who needed to hear it? And how many times have you chickened out? I've been a pastor for a long time, but I still struggle with that. I bet you do, too. Why is it so hard? Again, it goes back to that sinful nature that we were born with. It doesn't want to talk about Jesus. It doesn't want to be embarrassed by showing off our faith – because the sinner inside you is ashamed of your faith. That sinner inside you puts the opinion of other people ahead of God's opinion and makes it a battle for us to talk about Jesus. Spiritually speaking, most of us would have to admit that we can barely talk, just like the man in our gospel lesson could barely talk physically.

But just as Jesus had the power to untie his tongue, Jesus has the power to untie our tongues. He wiped away our sin and fear. He replaced God's record of all our failures with God's record of all his success. And Jesus lives personally in our hearts. The Holy Spirit lives personally in our hearts. They work in us to change us. Now, unlike the physical healing in our text, the spiritual miracle needs to happen over and over again. Once this man was able to talk, he was good. But we might struggle tomorrow even if we do a good job of sharing our faith today. Every day that we are here, we need Jesus to live in us, to inspire us, to pick us up when we fail and assure us that we are forgiven, and then to give us the joy to go back out there and try again.

How does he do that? Not by telling us to reach inside ourselves and find some inner strength. Not by telling us to search our feelings until we hear what he is saying. You'll never hear Jesus that way. He does it through his Word. He does it through holy communion. He does it through fellow Christians who hear our confession of failure and remind us of Jesus' forgiveness, who tell us again the story of the greatest miracle of all time, who bring the power of God, the gospel, to bear on our hearts and on our lives and lift us up again. Jesus works whenever that message is shared. **Jesus has the power to heal. He heals tongues to speak.** Those tongues are ours.

My brief experience of hearing loss is nothing compared to the man in our text or to the many people today who struggle with this affliction. But all of us share the spiritual reality of being sinners who can't hear the gospel on our own and certainly can't speak it the way we were born. But God did a miracle. He sent his Son into this world to save us. That Son has broken through our sin and made us new. Now we do hear the message of his love and forgiveness and we trust it. And by the power of God, we can and will share it, just as the children who sang in our service this morning did. Just as the Sunday School teachers we installed this morning will. My friends, marvel at the love of Christ and open your mouths and share it. Amen.