

## One Word Is All It Takes

In preparing for this sermon, I and my pastor-friend sat down early last week with our Greek Bibles and began to dissect the Gospel lesson, speaking up and “thinking out loud” as words or phrases or concepts entered into our minds. *Why did Jesus touch the ears and the tongue of the deaf mute? Why did He do this in private, and not where everyone else could see? Why did He spit on His fingers? What significance, if any, does the spittle of Christ play in this account and in our lives? Why did Jesus tell the crowds to stop singing His praises after the miracle occurred? The crowd proclaims, “He does all things well!” What’s so wrong with that? What’s the difference between doing something well and doing something good? Is there a difference? Why did Jesus sigh before speaking that performative Word of healing?*

And then an interesting point was made as we discussed the crowd and their role in this account. You see, the crowd generally gets a *bad rap* in this account. They’re proclaiming that Jesus “does all things well,” but, strangely, Jesus insists on “shushing” them. *The irony is unavoidable.* You can’t help but talk about it. The guy who couldn’t talk and couldn’t hear is given the ability by Christ Himself to hear and to speak, while the people who already had the ability to hear and speak are now being told to **not** speak, a command that they fail to heed. The more Jesus urged silence, the more they ran their mouths. And that leads us back to the question as to why Jesus would try to silence such praise. But...such a question misses a very important point that is so often overlooked: *The crowd did have faith in Jesus. They did bring the deaf mute to Christ, fully expecting Him to heal. This is certainly commendable.*

As interesting as this is to note, what I find even more interesting is the fact that this was commonly understood and taken for granted for much of the New Testament Church’s existence. Looking back over centuries’ worth of sermons and writings, it was very apparent that the pastors just assumed that everyone already knew that the crowd was faithful. They weren’t *perfect* in their faith. They didn’t understand **everything** there was to know about Jesus and His mission and ministry, *but they were faithful.* They came to Him. They brought others to Him.

And this is where our study of the word *ephphatha*—the Word Christ spoke as He commanded the ears to be opened and the tongue to be loosed—came to the forefront. You see, this particular Gospel lesson was used by the early Church for centuries as an integral part of the *baptismal liturgy*. This especially caught my attention given our circumstances today. We heard in our baptismal liturgy today the words of the Great Commission in Matthew’s Gospel and the words of Christ recorded for us in Mark’s Gospel, where Christ Himself rebukes the well-

intentioned disciples, imploring them to allow the littlest of children to come unto Him and be brought to Him. In addition to these Gospel passages, our ancient forefathers would have also proclaimed “*Ephphatha!*” This Gospel lesson would’ve been included as one of the readings. The reason the *ephphatha* text was read aloud for all to hear was because **all** needed to hear it and be reminded of the gift of life that Christ had given to each and every one of them. Everyone needed to be reminded of the life-giving power and efficacy of the Word of God. ***The Word of God works! It does what it says! It’s performative.*** “*Let there be...*” and there was! “*Little girl, I say to you ‘arise,’*” and she did. “*Lazarus, come out of the tomb,*” and he did. “*Ephphatha! Be opened!*” And the ears and the tongue instantly obeyed their Creator and Redeemer.

It’s this same *ephphatha* reality that your Lord continues to work in Holy Baptism this very day. It’s not the water that does the work, ***but the Word of God in, with, and under that water;*** the Word of God that snatches us from the devil and transfers us into God’s holy and heavenly kingdom; the Word of God that renames us and adopts us once for all time, putting upon us the eternal and triune name of God Himself, making us His co-heirs and His children of promise and everlasting salvation. This can ***never*** be taken away from us. No matter how bad life gets, we belong to Christ. **The Word works.** It never fades or loses its potency. It doesn’t need our help. It doesn’t have a shelf life. It’s ***always*** contemporary, always speaking to us right where we’re at in life. There’s **never** a time that God is not “I am.” We bear this very name upon our head and our hearts—“I am” as in “I am the resurrection and the life; I am the vine and you are the branches; I am the light of the world; I am the Good Shepherd; I am the door; I am the Bread of Life”—marking us as one who has been claimed, redeemed, and resurrected in His all-redeeming life, death, and resurrection.

Along these same lines and in keeping with our early Church grandparents of the faith, this very apropos *ephphatha* text that sounds in our ears today speaks to the faith of the crowd bringing the one who is in bondage to Christ. You witnessed it today. You were a part of it! The family, not just the immediate family, but the congregational family of faith, brings this little child of Adam to Christ because we know that He is the only One who can loosen the bonds of sin, death, and the devil that she and all children of Adam were conceived into. Our faith doesn’t save this child, but our faith ***compels*** us to bring this child to the One who can and does save her. The Word we hear fills our hearts and pours forth from our lips. This life-giving Word naturally bears good fruit; the fruits of faith witnessed in our thanks and praise and our pointing others to and bringing others to Christ. ***We get it. Maybe not perfectly, but we get it.*** Here is Christ! *Ephphatha!* His Word speaks forgiveness, and this child **is** forgiven. It’s that simple. All her sin is drowned and put to death in the waters of baptism. Her death sentence is commuted to life; life in Christ; eternal life and freedom in Him and because of Him.

The Word works! It's so simple, and yet so unbelievably profound, the heights and depths of which we'll never come close to understanding. ***The Word still works.*** I know we already know this, but how often do our words and deeds betray the fact that maybe we don't believe it? I won't waste the time enumerating the many ways our unbelief in the efficacy of the Word is put on full display in our daily lives. I will, however, point out the fact that so often we do disbelieve the power and efficacy of God's Word ***simply because we don't see the results we're looking for or hoping for.*** We disbelieve and doubt because we don't see immediate and tangible change in our immediate and tangible lives. So often we disbelieve because we're convinced that ***there has to be something bigger, better, flashier; something that generates more of the change we're hoping for, more hype and happiness and gushing emotions.*** "This...? This is just Word and Sacrament ministry. There's got to be more! There needs to be more! How else are we going to get through to people and make disciples and grow the Church?"

Folks: That's not yours to worry about. God is the One who opens the ears and hearts and minds of people. God is the One who gets through to people and grants life and growth out of sinful nothingness. God is the One who frees and loosens the bonds of sin. God is the One who works and sustains faith in people. As I've said in the past, the Church already has a Savior. It doesn't ***need*** you. It doesn't ***need*** me. As Christ Himself once said, "If these ones didn't cry out, the very stones in the street would cry out." God doesn't ***need*** me to make salvation work or to make Christ known. I could be replaced by a rock. But...God chooses to use me to work His gift of salvation. It's very humbling and more than a little terrifying. God chooses to use me to accomplish His will; my hands to do His baptizing; my mouth to speak His Word. Lord, have mercy!

He does the same thing with you in your daily vocations. As the LWML says, "[O]ur hands to work for Him, our feet to go on His errands, our voice to sing His praises, our lips to proclaim His redeeming love, our silver and our gold to extend His Kingdom, our will to do His will...." We are all called by Him to point to Him and bring others to Him and proclaim Him and His Truth; the Truth that says that the wage of sin is death and all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; the Truth that says that the wage of sin has been ***paid in full by the all-propitiating sacrifice of Jesus Christ***, the Lamb of God who takes away all the sin of the world. We're all called by Him to simply let the light and joy of our justification in Him shine forth for all to behold, like a city upon a mountaintop or candle in a dark room.

"Tetelestai! It is finished!" This is the single word that Christ victoriously proclaimed from His cross right before surrendering His Spirit and falling peacefully asleep in the sabbath rest of death in the hands of His loving Father. It is finished, once and for all! Christ's performative Word of victory ***still*** booms

from Golgotha in our ears and in our presence today. We behold this one-word victory over sin, death, and the devil in very real and tangible ways. *“Take and eat. Take and drink. This is My body and My blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sin. This Baptism now saves you. In My stead and by My command and authority I do declare you forgiven. Fear not! Be at peace.”* These performative words are **for you!** God speaks them, and they do what He says; they bring and confer a peace that surpasses all understanding; a peace that only God Himself can give; a peace that God Himself does give to you, to me, and to all who faithfully come and receive His free gifts of grace, mercy, and peace.

*“Faith comes through hearing; hearing the Word of Christ.”* May the life-giving, bond-breaking, Word of Christ be in your ears, in your hearts, and on your tongues, now and always. May you ever *decrease* so that He may ever *increase* and open the hearts and minds of all those He brings you into contact with. May His name be glorified in you and through you, and not in spite of you....AMEN.