

An elementary teacher in a public school was a devout Roman Catholic. She was teaching a class in reading, but she told the children, "You don't have to write or talk sometimes to get your point across." By way of example she stuck out her thumb and asked, "What does this mean?" The students all said, "I want a ride." Then she asked, "What does this mean?", and she held her finger up across her mouth. They all said, "Be quiet." Then she turned to one child and asked, "What can you say using signs?" He held up his hand flat to say STOP. She asked another little boy to do one, and he made the Catholic sign of the Cross. That just thrilled this devout Catholic and she asked, "Jerry, what does that mean?" He said, "It means I'm gonna shoot a free throw."

OK, first some background on this gospel text. When God commands anything, it obeys. In creation, nonbeing obeyed and gave way to being, and darkness obeyed and gave way to light, and chaos obeyed and gave way to order. Nothing in creation can resist its Creator. The only exception is human free will, which is the only thing in the universe that disobeys the divine command. That is why it is a far greater thing for God to make saints out of sinners than for God to make the entire universe out of nothing, for nothingness has no power to resist God, but we do.

Jesus fulfilled all the messianic prophecies literally, both physically and spiritually. For instance, He not only gave physical healing to the physically sick and physical hearing to the physically deaf, but He also gave spiritual hearing to the spiritually deaf and spiritual speech to the spiritually mute. (all adapted from Peter Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, Cycle B, p. 672)

Jesus often used miracles as teaching devices. They can illustrate and reveal spiritual sickness in the hearts of people who appear to be perfectly healthy. In Mark 7, Jesus travels to the region of the Decapolis, or the Ten Cities. This is pagan, foreign, Gentile territory. Once again, we see Jesus going wherever He needs to go to bring the Good News of His Father's love. Borders and differences don't stop Him -- or His message of love.

Based on the Greek text, the man who is deaf with a speech impediment, likely developed this condition over time. The Greek word used here for 'muteness' signals a speech impediment, likely stammering or stuttering. Perhaps the man could speak and hear when he was younger but, over time, lost this ability.

But his physical condition symbolizes a spiritual problem in Jesus' day and ours. Religious people can gradually become deaf to the voice of God – and the needs of our world. Isaiah the prophet warns this would happen – "They are ever hearing but never understanding." It's easy for us to tune out God's word and then we are often unable to hear, speak, or live God's ways.

The scripture readings indicate 3 symptoms: favoritism, lack of listening, and stymied prayer. One behavior that induces spiritual deafness is favoritism toward the wealthy, influential, good-looking, famous. James' congregation had so focused on treating the rich well that they tuned out the poor. They were more interested in social status and climbing the social ladder than listening to God's voice to care for the poor (James 2:1-5). Another symptom is a lack of listening and understanding one another. Everyone speaks their mind, but no one connects (James 1:19-20) Sounds a lot like our digital culture. Lots of talk, little connection. The third symptom occurs in prayer. The spiritually deaf don't know what to say. They can't listen to God or

communicate with Him. We can be so busy with our devices that we don't hear a word God is saying to us. (help from GRACEWORKS, 8 September 2024, p. 7)

OK, so what? I'm guessing that most of us can admit that we have experienced some or all of these symptoms. We've focused on the beautiful people, rich people, famous people, popular people. Perhaps our family, office, or team have lots of chatter, but not much listening. Or we spend way too much time on social media and are left frustrated that we don't have any real friends. Maybe we struggle with prayer. The solution is not a better network, more time with family, or a class on prayer.

Jesus' answer is to unstop our ears. Notice what He does. He SIGHS, or GROANS, a word used only twice in Mark's gospel. He sighs not out of judgment, despair, or hopelessness but as an act of prayerful mercy. This sigh is a groan of grief and dismay over this man's condition. Maybe we have sighed or groaned similarly while standing over a hospital bed or a dying friend or family member. This is the groaning that Paul describes in Romans 8 – sometimes we pray in the Spirit, with groans or sighs too deep for words. "The Spirit GROANS within us, in sighs too deep for words."

Then Jesus SIGNS. To communicate with the man, Jesus uses His hands and mouth for sign language, putting His fingers into his ears and His spit on the man's tongue. Jesus illustrates what God does when we are isolated and shut off. When we feel like we can't hear God's voice and have prayed multiple times, God sends us signs of His presence. He unstops our ears by assuring us that He hears us.

Then Jesus invites us to sigh, groan, and grieve with Him over the conditions of our world. We mirror Him with appropriate responses to our conditions. We sigh to release oxygen from our lungs. But we also sigh to release what we hold onto inside, and grieve over the sin in our lives and our world. We groan about our human condition, desiring God to intervene. We become dismayed with our attempts to fix things. We learn to trust in Jesus' intervention.

By sighing, groaning, and praying with Jesus, the spirit opens our eyes and ears and hearts to hear the gospel. We become like this no longer deaf or mute man -- able to hear and speak what we struggled to say before. We can repeat with Isaiah the prophet predicted "Say to those who are faint-hearted, Be strong! Do not be afraid! Here is your God....the ears of the deaf will no longer be sealed. (Is 35:4-5) (GRACEWORKS, p. 8)

Healing can begin today. The real miracle is that spiritual deafness is not permanent. We can allow Christ to place His fingers in our ears and His Body and Blood on our tongue, and in a bit of sign language, say to us, "Be opened."

Roberta Israeloff speaks of this gift of listening in an essay: "I can't count the number of times I've begun to complain – only to have my friend cut me off after 2 or 3 sentences with a well-intentioned but nonetheless misguided, "I know exactly what you're going through. The same thing just happened to me." Suddenly we're talking about her ungrateful kid, her lousy boss, her leaky fuel line, and I'm left nodding my head in all the right places, feeling angry and ripped off, wondering if we haven't all come down with a bad case of emotional attention disorder.

"Nothing's more natural than trying to soothe an overwrought friend with assurances that she's not alone. But calamities resemble each other only from afar; up close they're as unique as fingerprints.

“What we all hope for, when we turn to a friend because we’re feeling low or agitated or wildly happy, is to find someone who sounds as if they have all the time in the world, someone who doesn’t rush us. We don’t always want answers or advice. Sometimes we just want company.

“I’m learning to follow the other person’s lead, to pay attention to body language, facial gestures, tone of voice; to hear what’s left unsaid; to recall relevant details and make helpful associations and connections....This ability to be with someone in their pain and happiness is the cornerstone of genuine empathy. We have to immerse ourselves in another’s experience, to sustain attention in the other person, to listen.” (WOMAN’S DAY, July 13, 1999, found in CONNECTIONS, 8 September 2024)

Third and finally, This EPHPHATHA, this opening, specifically of our ears, is the prayer we need to make for the gift we need to receive. We need the gift of EPHPHATHA – the gift of being generous, open, and selfless of heart. This enables us to listen generously and compassionately: to bring healing and life to those who need the support, the affirmation and the peace of loving and being loved that the simple act of listening can give.

The Irish band Mumford and Sons adapted Shakespeare’s song “Sigh no More, My Ladies,” with a note of confession and love in their song “Sigh No More.”

(GREG SINGS) “Serve God, love me and mend

This is not the end

Live unbruised, we are friends

And I’m sorry

I’m sorry

Sigh no more, no more

One foot in sea one on shore

My heart was never pure

You know me

You know me

And man is a giddy thing

Oh man is a giddy thing

Oh man is a giddy thing

Oh man is a giddy thing

Love that will not betray you, dismay or enslave you,

It will set you free

Be more like the one you were made to be

There is a design,

An alignment to cry

Of my heart to see

The beauty of love as it was made to be. (Marcus Mumford, et al, 'Sigh No More,' Universal Music, 2009)

That love is revealed in a person, Jesus Christ. Out of our sighings and groanings, out of our exasperation, grief, and longing, Jesus says -- "Be Opened." Hear the gospel again, know the condition of our world, and trust in the one who sighs, grieves, groans, and reopens our ears to hear His word and our mouths to speak His peace. Because one day, we will sigh no more, because God's love will never betray us – it will set us free. Amen. (song idea and commentary adapted from GRACEWORKS, 8 September 2024, p. 8)

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