

Be opened - with all your heart!
CCUM - 6 Sep 2015
Sermon by Glo Wellman

Mark 7: 31 - 37

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

³⁶ Then Jesus[c] ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Ephphatha (ef-fa-tha) - Open up!
Or others translate this - Be opened.

Open up!! Feels like more of a command. And we can certainly envision Jesus looking to the heavens, then commanding - Open up!!

But, “Be opened” suggests far more. Are we open to whatever is being revealed to us? What can we do to be more open to all that God has to offer?

Some have said that “Ephphatha is the very key to Jesus’ ministry.... this one Aramaic word. Very few Aramaic words have survived into the Greek, one being Abba (when Jesus referred to God as Daddy) Another Aramaic phrase is “Talitha Koum” which means “get up. Our Gospels were not written in Aramaic. The Gospels were written in Greek and Hebrew. This one Aramaic word “Ephphatha” has the power to bring Jesus closer, as he speaks in his voice, “Be opened.” This is central to his ministry and message.

In our scripture this morning, I imagine us as the deaf man.... who could not hear and who had a speech impediment. This implies that he may have heard at one time, and learned to speak, but had lost his hearing.

As we have noticed many times in the telling of Jesus’ ministry, word got out pretty quickly about this man, this miracle worker, and what he was preaching and doing. The man who was deaf had some very good friends who were willing to try anything to help their friend. Being deaf or having any kind of disability was a distinct disadvantage. In ancient times and sometimes often still today, folks believed that this person was disabled because of a punishment from God for some wrongdoing.... for sin. When we see sin as “being out of balance” or “Missing the mark” in our life and choices, yes a disability can make life challenging to say the very least. Most of us today know that we are all differently abled. And our God does not “punish” us in this way. And yet prejudice creates limits.

³¹⁻³⁵ Then he left the region of Tyre, went through Sidon back to Galilee Lake and over to the district of the Ten Towns. Some people brought a man who could neither hear nor speak and asked Jesus to lay a healing hand on him. He took the man off by himself, put his fingers in the man’s ears and some spit on the man’s tongue. Then Jesus looked up in prayer, [sighed] mightily, and commanded, “Ephphatha!—Open up!” And it happened. The man’s hearing was clear and his speech plain.

³⁶⁻³⁷ Jesus urged them to keep it quiet, but they [couldn’t resist, they were] beside themselves with excitement. “He’s done it all and done it well. He gives hearing to the deaf, speech to the speechless.”

In a very physical, and intimate process, Jesus laid his hands on this man, and used his spit (which was at the same time was thought to have curative powers) to heal him.

But, is being deaf a disability - many today would argue that it is not. I took several semesters of ASL and learned more than I expected to about Deaf Culture. Deaf people and Deaf Culture teaches that parents who are deaf desire to have children who are deaf. People who live in Deaf culture and speak American Sign Language (or in another country, that country's sign language) like who they are and what abilities they have. Debates rage about whether things like cochlear implants, which give many who are deaf the ability to have a sensation that is something like what we would call hearing are appropriate. Some say that children born deaf should, by all means, have cochlear implants. Others say that it is cruel and inhumane to even think about it! Rev Kirk Moore of the Union Congregational Church in Illinois sheds some light on an interpretation of this scripture for individuals who are deaf -

A Deaf person might read this story of Jesus and wonder, "Why would Jesus want to ruin that man's life?"

A hearing person might read the story and think, "How wonderful that Jesus performed a miracle and fixed the defect!"

The Claggett Statement, a document put together by Deaf and hearing Christians in 1984, recognizes both that the church has been part of the oppression of Deaf people and that it needs to move to a new position of *liberation* for both Deaf and hearing people. Christians have historically marginalized those who are deaf – teaching them that they should change from Deaf into hearing.

Here's a little part of the Claggett Statement:

We Believe: that the message of Jesus is a message of liberation—not liberation from deafness, per se, but liberation from all forms of oppression, which include the denial of basic human needs for things like unencumbered communication, healthy human interaction, self-esteem, positive recognition of one's culture and language, and meaningful education.

We do not view deafness as a sickness or handicap. We view it as a gift from God, which has led to the creation of a unique language and culture, worthy of respect and affirmation.

We believe that it is necessary to stop trying to communicate the Gospel through hearing people's eyes, through their interpretation and understanding of the Bible, and through their methods. Deaf people have a right to know the Gospel in their own language, and relevant to their own context.

So what are we to do with Mark 7:31_37?

Be opened in this context isn't about changing a Deaf person into a hearing one. It is about knowing that Jesus opens our eyes and ears and hearts to love God and to one another.

Living this Jesus Way is liberating - it opens us to a world of possibilities. All of us can be liberated from limits and restrictions to become all that God wants us to be.

How are we closed off from spirit? From God? And even from our own lives?

We have many distractions. Some of these are a necessary part of our life and security. Some focus our attention away from what's most important.

We may have had experiences that make us fearful and hesitant to try new things. We are used to the way things have always been. We need courage to "be opened" up to other possibilities, and willing to stretch in new directions.

What do we need to be listening to?

To the still small voice within that know what the next right action needs to be.

We need to listen to our own true needs crying out and also for the genuine needs of our brothers and sisters.

We need to see and hear the miracles around us.

For the last 6 weeks we have been guided in our worship by Psalm 51 -

Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me.

Enter me; conceive a new, true life [within me.]

Give me a clean bill of health.

Make a fresh start in me... shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.

Breathe holiness in me.... sustain me with a willing spirit, put a fresh wind in my sails.

Our United Methodist motto is “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” a wonderful beacon to guide our practice and what it means to be the church. This also offers us some insight on what it means to aspire to “clean-hearted” living.

Jesus has said, “Be opened!”

How can we live in a “clean-hearted” open-hearted way?

We look back at the scriptural messages we’ve had about clean-hearted living and we remember –

May we live with humility and the assurance that we are one among many, all of us loved and cherished by God.

May we grown into mature loving people ourselves, who know how to communicate effectively, especially valuing the gift of listening.

May we live with honesty and integrity.

May we be open to God’s good guidance and direction that is always available when we pause.

May we have the confidence to ask for help and receive help from others.

May we not always takes things so seriously.... we must remember to dance!

And when we must, may we put on the full armor of God and stand with and for others as a passionate voice for justice.

When we do these things - When we live our lives in a truly clean-hearted, open-hearted way, we will know the true liberation of God. We will have listened and taken seriously God’s wish for us - to “Be opened” - and we will be grateful for all the possibilities and blessings that God has to offer.

Psalm 51 (The Message)

¹⁻³ Generous in love—God, give grace!

Huge in mercy— wipe out my bad record.

Scrub away my guilt,

soak out my sins in your laundry.

I know how bad I've been;

my mistakes are staring me down.

⁴⁻⁶ You're the One I've ignored and forgotten,

and you've seen it all,

seen the full extent of my wrongs.

I've been out of step with you for a long time.

What you're after is truth from the inside out.

Enter me, then; conceive a new, true life.

⁷⁻¹³ Soak me in your laundry and I'll come out clean,
scrub me and I'll have a snow-white life.
Tune me in to foot-tapping songs,
set these once-broken bones to dancing.
Don't look too close for blemishes,
give me a clean bill of health.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
God, make a fresh start in me,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Don't throw me out with the trash,
or fail to breathe holiness in me.

Bring me back from exile,
and sustain in me a willing spirit
put a fresh wind in my sails!
and I'll sing anthems to your life-giving ways.
Unbutton my lips, dear God;
I'll let loose with your praise.

God, make a fresh start in me,
shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life