

Proper 18B – September 6, 2015
Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Ephphatha—be opened!

In the second part of our gospel reading, we hear that some people bring to Jesus a man who is deaf and has an impediment in his speech. They ask Jesus to heal him and he does. Putting his fingers into the man's ears and touching his tongue, Jesus says one word in Aramaic—*Ephphatha*—which means, “be opened.” *Ephphatha!* As Frederick Buechner states,

“If I can't see you for some reason but can only hear you, you don't exist for me in space, which is where seeing happens, but in time, which is where hearing happens. Your words follow one after the other the way tock follows tick. When I have only the sound of you to go by, I don't experience you as an object the way I would if you stood before me—something that I can walk around, inspect from all angles, [and] more or less define. [Instead] I experience you more the way I experience the beating of my own heart or the flow of my own thoughts. A deaf man coming upon me listening to you would think that nothing of importance was going on. But something of extraordinary importance is going on. I am taking you more fully into myself than I can any other way. Hearing you speak brings me by the most direct of all routes something of the innermost secret of who you are.

It is no surprise that the Bible uses hearing, not seeing, as the predominant image for the way human beings know God. They can't walk around God and take God in like a cathedral or an artichoke. They can only listen to time for the sound of God—to the good times and bad times of their own lives for the words God is addressing to, of all people, them.”ⁱ

We can understand this in other ways, too. For example, we know how detached the act of seeing can be, since we continually see things on TV that may touch us but do not alter our lives. We watch scenes of cruelty and carnage and tragedy daily while the newscaster's sophisticated voice-over distances us from reality by putting everything “in perspective.”ⁱⁱ Were we to hear, really hear, the sound of warfare, for example—the screams and groans of the dying, or the desperate cries of refugees on the run—we might be more deeply engaged. Ephphatha—be opened.

We have also known, or heard, of difficult situations of children who are entirely shut up in themselves because they are deaf and mute from birth. The devotion and skill of language specialists and surgeons can succeed in opening these deaf ones to a world of signs and/or speech. But what happens when the ears and tongue, so to speak, of the heart and mind are blocked , amongst those of us who have the physical abilities to hear? How many people are there—how many families, for example—who no longer listen or speak to each other. How many “dialogues of the deaf,” as it were, exist between individuals or families, groups or nations, wherever there no longer exists love, or mutual

trust and respect, or acceptance of the other in all their faults and weaknesses, or esteem for others' or one's own most precious qualities? Bringing to mind such situations can help us to grasp the deeper meanings of this story of the healing of the deaf mute. Jesus is faced with people, including his own disciples who are deaf at times to his message. He has come to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: "to unstop the ears of the deaf" (35:6). Jesus not only opens ears in a physical way, he also constantly challenges people to listen, to be responsive to God and one another. To all of us he commands "Ephphatha"—be opened.

Having just experienced an opening up of his mission beyond his own people in the encounter with the Syrophenician woman, Jesus himself shows such an openness in several ways in this story: first, to foreigners (this story doesn't take place in Israel but still in foreign territory); secondly, he shows openness to the people who come bringing their deaf and mute friend; thirdly he shows openness to the deaf man himself, taking him aside so that he wouldn't feel so self-conscious, and then doing the healing with great physicality—putting fingers in his ears, spitting and touching his tongue—so that the deaf man could see and feel (since he couldn't hear what Jesus was doing), and thus participate in his own healing . Ephphatha—be opened, like this man's ears, and like Jesus who opens the man's ears.

Now as the old adage goes, God gave each of us two ears and one mouth, so you'd think it would make sense that we would listen twice as much as we speak. True worship is defined in the 40th Psalm [v. 6] as the gift of an open ear (literally translated, "ears you have dug for me").ⁱⁱⁱ God is constantly calling each of us through the many voices that come to us from within and without. If we would but stop, look and listen, we might discover our vocation—God's call—somewhere through these voices. One of the recurring notes of biblical judgment is the damning and almost despairing line, "they have ears to hear but they hear not." This does not refer to physical deafness, but to all the distracted, distorted or detached ways that people are deaf to God and to the cries of God's creation.^{iv}

As Christians we are summoned to share the Good News—the Love and Power and Purpose of the Living Christ—by word and deed. I suspect, however, that such good news is more often effectively communicated first by our concerned and attentive listening. If evangelism really means sharing the good news, what is more evangelical than the good news that someone cares enough for another simply to listen to him or her? As the Letter of James says, "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak...[1:19]." Or as St. Francis put it, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and, when necessary, use words."

Jesus says one word in Aramaic to the man—*Ephphatha*—be opened—like this man's ears; and like Jesus himself who grows with an ever-widening embrace.

Ephphatha—be opened. Could not such a word serve well as our manifesto in this parish and in our lives in the year ahead? Let us resolve to be open to the presence of God as the Living Christ becomes open to us through the many parts of our personal lives and our life as a church.

Ephphatha—be opened—to God, in the ways we encounter and affirm God in worship *and* in the questions of our searching.

Ephphatha—be opened—to God in the warmth of relationships *and* in the heat or cold of confrontations.

Ephphatha—be opened—to God on the edges of change *and* in the wellsprings of tradition.

Ephphatha—be opened—to God in the quietness of prayer *and* in the shouts of the poor or those in pain.

Ephphatha—be opened—to God in the beginnings of joy *and* in the endings of loss and sorrow.

Ephphatha—be opened—to God in the giving of love *and* in the receiving of all else that comes with living, both the good and the difficult.^v

If we would be so opened, how eloquent our lives would be—what glory and honor we would confer on Jesus Christ. Then we would declare as did the people who saw Jesus heal the deaf-mute man: “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.” Ephphatha—be opened!

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 58.

ⁱⁱ See Parker Palmer, The Active Life (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 86.

ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, that’s a perennial problem for folks like me, for generally speaking, we clergy are generally speaking! Attentiveness, listening, is making a conscious effort to hear, with the heart and the mind.

^{iv} As one observer put it,

“The spiritual intimation of unseen realms, subliminal or supernormal, led to an ancient culture of intuitive hearkening, as gods and humans entered into direct conversation with one another. Hebrews and Christians sought God’s word, propitiating him to incline his ears to their individual cries (Psalm 88), while Jeremiah (6:10) blasted the ‘uncircumcised’ ears of those who failed to comprehend the deity’s subtleties...Medieval Christians [portrayed that] Christ (as the Word of God) was conceived in his mother’s womb after a dove entered her ear...[And] the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, who once claimed that ‘the intangible that is invisible as well as untouchable can still be audible,’ suggested in his classic text, *Listening with the Third Ear*, that we truly hear through greater use of our intuition” —and our God-given imagination and faith, I would add (Quoted in “Ear” in The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 358).

^v So, let us listen with our ears and our hearts, and see with our eyes and our minds and insight—our inner sight. Let us be not just Christ’s hands and feet in this world, but also His eyes and ears. Let us be opened to declare our faith with our whole life as our reading from the Letter of James calls us to do. And behold, God is there!