

## Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 10, 2017

Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church  
Farmington, NM

**Mark 7:31-37** Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

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

<sup>36</sup> Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. <sup>37</sup> People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." (NIV 2011)

### "Hope Amid Suffering"

How many of you were looking to the skies this past week wondering if Jesus might be coming down on a cloud? It kind of felt like the end of the world, didn't it? Hurricane Harvey had barely faded when Irma started smashing into the Caribbean. And now we hear Jose is hot on her heels. Add to that a massive earthquake in Mexico. Then there's the situation with the wildfires consuming tens of thousands of acres across Montana, Oregon, and California.

Maybe you've never lived through an earthquake or a hurricane or wild fire close enough to cause you to evacuate your home. Whether they are just down the road or on the coast or on the other side of the world, our hearts go out to them. And we can recognize the look on their faces. We don't really have to go through everything they do to get a glimpse of what they must be feeling. Helpless. Lost. It's that feeling of being completely unable to process what is going on in their lives. Because of the trauma they are still experiencing, they can't even think of being capable of comprehending what just happened. They are completely at a loss for what to do next, completely unsure about tomorrow, much less their long term future. Pain, suffering, and fear plague us in different ways in our own lives. And when they do, Jesus wants us to turn to him to find hope amid suffering.

That's exactly what we see from Jesus in Mark chapter seven. This account begins with Jesus leaving the Gentile territory today known as Lebanon. He travels over to Israelite territory and then continues to the far side, the east side of the Sea of Galilee. When Matthew tells of this time period, he summarizes the way crowds of people brought many different people to Jesus for his help. In the Gospel according to Mark, this evangelist zooms in on one such example. A man is brought to Jesus, a man who is incapable of hearing and has a serious speech impediment. The unnamed bringers of this man beg Jesus to show him mercy and heal him of his affliction.

Our world has various ways of coping with things that are too complex for easy fixes, that defy simple solutions. They depend on how you see the world and how you see yourself as a member of the human race. It is generally assumed in our world that we human beings are just a product of some cosmic accident. Our main goal then is to do all we can do to survive. We as a species want to prevent dominant individuals from competing against and defeating the weaker members of our species. Sure, there may be some sort of transcendent higher power. We might not be sure who he is or what he is or how to connect with him or her, but we do our best to channel positive energy and develop positive feelings to cope as best we can with the troubles of this life.

We don't know hear about this disabled man's friends, who they are or what other efforts they've already made to help their friend. We don't know what kind of ways they offered support for him in his need. But we do know that helpless feeling standing powerlessly at the side of someone we love during a particularly difficult trial in their life. You can't go through it for them or provide any short cuts. You don't even have any easy answers that won't be dismissed as overly simplistic or belittling of their pain. We don't know anything about his man, whether he was burdened with this physical affliction since birth or whether he developed his disability after an accident or debilitated after a terrible disease. We don't know how he adapted or responded. We don't know anything about this man or the friends who brought him to see Jesus, but we can relate to them.

We know this vague or godless solutions are insufficient to adequately address the very real pain and suffering of our world. Do we just give money? But then, what if it goes to some scammers? We offer our thoughts and prayers. But do those really make any substantial differences or just make us feel better? Too often, though, we get callused when we are confronted with misery and suffering. So terrible. So awful. But they happen so often. And what can we really do about it? Getting emotionally invested and trying to make a positive difference so often just leads to feeling more defeated when we see failures. It even has an impact on us spiritually. Faith feels like it's useless. Going to church, participating in Bible study, reading the Bible become chores, something we only do out of obligation. We feel imposed upon when asked to serve in ministry.

Psychologists have a term for this dullness we feel in our faith. Cognitive dissonance causes people to perceive events out of sync with reality. Everything that happens is interpreted negatively or predicted it will turn out poorly. When we are surrounded by suffering, as Christians, we lose track of the facts that really matter. When we are in the middle of a painful experience, we fall into the trap of being unable to see how God can work out any solution.

But what really matters for our spiritual health are the facts. What will make a meaningful impact on this world of suffering is the truth about Jesus. Jesus goes about his ministry with a kingdom focus, but it's also a people focus. This encounter with the deaf and mute man is just a highlight, but a prime example. Jesus takes this man entirely away from the crowd to focus on him privately. He is removed from the excitement and distraction of the crowd. His eyes are able to focus on what Jesus is doing. Jesus determines to communicate with him with a makeshift sign language, making physical contact with his ears. Touching his

tongue with Jesus' own saliva. Jesus lets out a deep sigh and gazes toward heaven to let know the source of his medical miracle. Then Jesus issues the command: **"Be opened!"** (Mark 7:34) And the power of Jesus' word is enough to cause the deafness to leave the man. The chains binding the man's tongue fall to the ground.

We aren't provided any information about this man who was healed by Jesus or the friends who brought him to Jesus. But what they did was the best, most important thing anyone can do for a friend filled with fear or pain. Ultimately, the best thing anyone can ever do in the middle of senseless tragedy is come to Jesus. When standing helpless as a witness to another human being's grief, we can bring them to Jesus.

We feel the burden of coming up with solutions to the world's problems. We take on ourselves the responsibility for fixing the messes we see in the world. That's pragmatism, not faith. We make deals and attempt to bargain with God. We offer our best, our obedience, offer to give things up for him if only he would give us what we're after. But that's not hope. That's superstition.

Hope is found when human pain and suffering is met in Jesus. In the touch, in the sigh, in the powerful command of Jesus there is hope. Jesus is the difference maker. His love moved him to act. We don't hear about the man's background or his faith. But ultimately, that's not what was important. This miracle, this suspension of the laws of nature, is all about Jesus.

And yet, when Jesus shows himself for who he really is, when people catch on to the not-so-subtle clues he is giving them, Jesus suddenly slams on the brakes. A pilot explained to an inquisitive passenger how a huge airplane hitting the ground at 130 miles an hour is stopped. Three braking systems work together. The spoilers on the wings create resistance, the wheels brake, and then the pilot throws the jet engines into reverse. Jesus puts the brakes on this exuberant crowd. But he has a purpose in mind. Their excitement would logically cause them to conclude Jesus is the Messiah. Then they would associate all the baggage of their earthly and political ideas associated with that identity. So Jesus did what he could to combat that identity until he could show what he really came to do as the Messiah.

As the Messiah, Jesus is focused on his highest priority, his ultimate goal. Without going on to Jerusalem and falling into the clutches of the religious elite, Jesus would have been a powerful and memorable prophet, remembered fondly for the kind things he did for the lonely and oppressed. But Jesus hasn't just done some things well for some people in a limited sphere. When he came in the flesh, he did all things well for you and me. When he fulfilled the Father's plan announced already in the Garden of Eden, he did all things well. When he hung with his life draining from Calvary's cross, he did all things well. When he overcame senselessness on the cross, he did it for you. When he conquered the biological reality of death, he did it for you. He did all things well when he went from the Decapolis to Easter's empty tomb to free you from life's distraction and the destructive influences surrounding you in this fallen and sin-corrupted world. He came to give you more than hearing and speech. He came to rescue your soul and give you life.

So now you can share the overflowing amazement of the crowds. For the spiritual dullness that plagues your heart, Jesus says: "Be opened!" For all the doubts and fears taking their toll in your life, Jesus commands: "Be opened!" For the lifelessness you feel in your faith, Jesus words bring the result: "Be opened!" Jesus makes the difference. Jesus acts to bring healing for the relationships suffering in your life. Jesus acts to show the purpose of your life that is much more than one fragile accident from one species among millions. Jesus acts to give more than just positive energy. He acts to give your heart his forgiveness and his peace.

So now is not the time to put on the brakes. Now is the time when Jesus wants the results of his work as Messiah to spread beyond barriers and borders, spread without inhibitions or limitations. The news ignites your engine of faith so you can take flight on the fuel of Christ's infinite forgiveness. Jesus is the difference maker for the fears and doubts of those around you. You don't have to be as smooth as Billy Graham or as knowledgeable as an expert Bible apologist. Do what happened on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. Bring your friends to Jesus. Let Jesus bring his healing. Let Jesus work his hope.

Natural disasters all around our country and our world make messes of millions of lives. They contribute to the misery of massive amounts of humanity. Bringing relief will require long term efforts and attention rather than any simple solution. Even billions of dollars handed over by congress won't do much good without human capital invested in rebuilding communities and repairing lives God doesn't offer a band-aid for the problem of human pain and suffering. But he does offer the world his Son. And in Jesus Christ, our world has hope. Amen.

*+ May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and work. Amen. +*