

Opening Statement, Closing Argument

[Text - Mark 7:31-37]

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In this morning's New Testament reading, Jesus does something a bit unconventional, and a bit *uncouth*. He sticks his fingers into a man's ears; then he spits on his fingers and touches the man's tongue. Let's face it, that's pretty gross! Yet the results are pretty great! A man who couldn't hear a thing, or speak clearly, now hears and speaks perfectly. Maybe it's because the man can't hear, that Jesus pokes his fingers into his ears - to physically communicate his intention. And using his *saliva* like a healing *salve*, is Jesus' way of tangibly demonstrating his therapeutic intent. Jesus goes to great lengths to make sure this man understands that he hasn't come to do him harm, but to improve and enhance his life. And through this interaction, Jesus shows that he is willing to overcome any obstacles that would separate the two of them, or separate that man from those around him. Jesus meets him where he is, looks him in the eye and says "Ephphatha - Be opened!" And with that command, the man's ears are opened and his tongue is set free.

By personally reaching into this individual's closed world, Jesus breaks through his isolation, removes the impediments, and opens-up the possibility for his full inclusion within his community. Prior to this encounter, that man was most likely an outcast - one who had to beg just to survive. Those around him would have questioned his standing as a "proper" child of God, because he didn't hear, speak, or act as they did. And he may well have questioned his own self-worth, because of his pronounced differences from the majority of those around him. Yet Jesus changes all of this, by his willingness to physically, emotionally, and spiritually connect; and by issuing that one short command, "Ephphatha - Be Opened!"

This morning, I would argue that this command isn't just intended for that one hurting and isolated child of God. I believe that this is the fundamental command to *all* God's children of every time and place:

“Ephphatha - Be Opened!” Today, you and I, along with all people, are called to be *open* - to be set free from any impediments that hinder our living and prevent our loving. Our ears are to be open, to hear the Good News of Divine Compassion and Grace. Our tongues are to be set-free, to boldly proclaim that this gracious compassion is for *all* people, no matter who they are. Patiently, yet persistently, *every* barrier that separates people from one another, and from God, must be removed, so that all of us can clearly hear and faithfully respond to the message of Divine welcome and acceptance, inclusion and love.

June 21st, 1991 - twenty-five years ago - Brecksville United Church of Christ declared itself “Open and Affirming” of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people. Yeah! Unfortunately, in the eyes of some hyper-religious people, this openness to *all* makes *us* all a bunch of hell-bound heretics! But hey, nobody’s perfect! The truth is, that throughout its 200 year history, this congregation has been a Community of Faith where a person’s Divine Value isn’t questioned because he or she is different. On the contrary, this is a place where we value people *because* of their differences.

Even though the United Church of Christ wasn’t formed until 1957, the forward-thinking attitude and bold witness of our modern-day Denomination is clearly evident in the lives and faith of those Congregationalists and Presbyterians who first gathered here to worship. The men and women who planted our church’s roots had a spirit of openness and receptiveness which recognized that there can always be “More light and truth to break-forth from God’s Holy Word.” Years before the issue of slavery would thrust our nation into Civil War, the abolitionist stance of our early church members was clearly expressed in word and in action. From the very start, this Community of Faith has stood-up for people who society wasn’t necessarily ready to welcome, affirm or embrace.

Of course, there are certain risks and dangers that come with standing-up for those vulnerable people who society or religion often reject and condemn. For Jesus, the result was his *own* rejection and condemnation, crucifixion and death. [Which, I realize, isn't the best sales-pitch for persuading others to join us: "Come and follow Christ's Way of openness, compassion and grace...side-effects *may* include persecution, suffering and death!"] Fortunately, however, you and I have the tremendous advantage of living after the Crucifixion, *and* the Resurrection; therefore, we know the whole story! We know that even when the power of fear and prejudice, hatred and death has done its worst, that the Divine Power of Forgiveness and Grace, Life and Love will ultimately prevail! Hopefully, this insight helps us move beyond our fears and doubts - making us open and tenacious in our welcome *and* in our witness.

In this morning's reading, as Jesus opens-up this one man's ability to communicate, it's as if the ears and tongues of everyone present are also opened. The more Jesus tells them to keep quiet, the more passionately they proclaim the Good News: "This Jesus does everything well! He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak!" For the people of Israel, these restorative actions are unmistakable signs of the Divine Presence, as foretold by Isaiah and the other prophets of old; therefore it's not going to be easy to keep this quiet. Once the wider community sees and comprehends the amazing compassion, power and grace that Jesus Christ embodies, this Good News *will* grow, and spread, and begin to change people's lives!

Immediately after he heals this man, Jesus orders those who witness it to "tell no one" - the time for spreading the news of who he is, had not yet arrived. Unfortunately, centuries later, we in the Church are often content to follow that outdated order. Well, not today! Today's standing order is *Ephphatha*: Be Opened! Open-up and embrace the Good News - hear it with fresh ears; respond to it with open minds and hearts, so that together we might continue to be a part of this wonderful, Life-changing ministry. After all, it may well be *your* personal example of openness and acceptance, kindness, and

compassion which finally opens-up for someone else the marvelous reality of God's all-encompassing Love and Grace. And what a wonderful experience *that* is - not just for the other person, but also for you and me!