

March 11, 2018

"Be Open..."

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 7:31-35, 37

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Today I'm going to start with a little history lesson about Cape Cod. Actually, it's about Martha's Vineyard. And I didn't know this until a colleague told me, but from the eighteenth century into the early twentieth century, long before it became a tourist destination, or a place to make a movie like *Jaws*, or a place for celebrities and presidents to live and vacation, Martha's Vineyard was unique in another way. It was unique because it was, effectively, a bilingual community. The people there spoke in English and, what other language do you think? (Get answers) Well... it was sign language. Because somehow, someway, a recessive gene established itself into the hereditary pool on the Vineyard. And since the island was so isolated at that time, marriage between relatives spread this gene, and many families found themselves with at least one person who couldn't hear. In fact, in some areas of the Vineyard, like Chilmark, as many as one in twenty-five of the people were deaf. So sign language became a second language. You see, to the islanders, being deaf wasn't a significant drawback, it was just the way you were born. Just as some people were born with blond hair, others with black hair, some had blue eyes, others had brown eyes, some could hear, and others could not. So, on Martha's Vineyard, deafness was not so much a disability, but was simply a trait that people accepted and learned to live with.

But, as we heard in today's scripture, that was not the case in the area of the Decapolis, where Jesus was traveling. Because Mark tells us about a deaf man who couldn't speak well, which is often the case with someone who can't hear. And this man was obviously a concern in the community because "they", meaning perhaps many, brought him to Jesus, asking him to lay his hands on the man. Begging Jesus to heal him and make him well. Which he did.

Now at first glance, this passage seems rather straightforward. A deaf man is cured. But, as is true in all scripture stories, we are to ask the question, "What does it mean for me?" Where am I in the narrative? So let's consider the possibilities. The most obvious is that, maybe on this Healing Service Sunday, you're like the deaf man – wanting Jesus to lay his hands on you, or on a loved one. Wanting healing. Healing of a physical ailment or illness, healing of an addiction, of depression, healing of the pain of loneliness or sorrow, healing of a broken relationship. And you come today wanting Jesus to help you as well. Yes, that's one possibility.

But let's look at another possibility - who are the 'theys' the story talks about? An educated guess says the 'theys' are the so-called normal ones, the ones who appear to have it all together, the ones who say they are 'just fine, thank you.' The ones who find it easy to identify an obvious imperfection in someone else. As Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber says, "I can't help feeling like it would have been more sensible if all of the 'theys' who brought the deaf man to Jesus, might have also considered seeking healing for themselves as well." Hmmmm. In truth, doesn't that sound a little like some of us here today? Wanting to assume that we're okay – healthy, whole, no problems. But more than willing to prescribe help for someone else with a more obvious flaw. You see, we're usually better at identifying other people's issues and problems than admitting to our own. And yet, when we're most honest with ourselves, we know that we, too, have our own issues and problems. And I'm not speaking of physical brokenness, but those shortcomings that may be affecting our spiritual wholeness. For aren't we sometimes deaf to another's cry for understanding or acceptance. Aren't we often blind to the needs and feelings of others. Don't our hearts sometimes attack with judgment or resentment toward someone. Aren't we sometimes paralyzed with guilt and we just can't seem to move on to forgive ourselves. Don't we struggle with those demons of greed or lust or pride. Don't we all have broken places and insecurities that need repair – broken dreams, broken spirits, broken hearts? And these are dis-eases of our soul that affect us just as much, or even more so, than the diseases or brokenness of our bodies.

Now regardless of who you are in today's story, the real point of the passage is when Jesus uses the expression, "Ephphatha" (epp-fa-tha) when healing the man. It means, 'be open.' Be open! You see, this healing was going to be a life changing event for this man. Everything would be different. And perhaps, the man was anxious or even hesitant about what was going to happen. You know, sometimes people are comfortable in their situations, no matter how bad they might be. And so, one has to wonder – would this man have come to Jesus on his own accord – asking for help, for change, for healing. Or, was he satisfied staying within his comfort zone? The place he had been his whole life. It's like the story of Jim. Jim just wasn't feeling well, so he went to the doctor for a checkup. After all the myriad of tests and procedures, the doctor said to him, "Well, Jim, based on my examination, the best thing for you is to change your lifestyle. Cut out all sweets and fatty foods, give up alcohol, and exercise thirty minutes a day." There was a long pause, and Jim looked at the doctor and said, "Well, to be honest with you, Doc, I don't deserve the best. What's the second best?"

Isn't there truth in Jim's answer? And, could that be us? Because how many times have we too heard, "you need to eat right," but we don't. How many times have we heard, "exercise more," but we don't. And these admonitions hold true not only regarding our physical condition, but our spiritual condition as well. How many times have we heard Jesus say, "Forgive and you will be forgiven." But we don't. We hang on to our anger and resentment and re-play the pain over and over again. How many times have we heard, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be given you." But we don't. We don't put God first, seeking His will or way – instead we try to do things our way. And then we wonder why things can get so out-of-sorts. How many times have we heard, "Love others as you love yourself." But we don't. We criticize, we judge, we ignore, we are indifferent to the needs of others. And so the question is – are we open to changing ourselves?

And doesn't that get to the real heart of the matter? To be open to God's presence, God's word, God's action, God's will in our lives. You see, so often we think of being healed as being whole from just a physical standpoint. When all along, our deeper healing, our real wholeness, is all about being open to God, allowing God to touch our souls. Some of you may remember about a year ago I showed you a video about Nick Vujicic, the man you see on the screen. He was born without any arms or legs, and at age ten, tried to commit suicide. Think for a moment having no arms or legs... but Nick opened himself to let God work in his life, and now he travels all over the world talking about his faith and how he has such joy and meaning in his life. And yes he would like to have arms and legs, but he knows there is something more important. He says, "What good is it to be complete on the outside when you're broken on the inside?" What good is it to be complete on the outside when you're broken on the inside? Nick Vujicic is a healed person, and there is his beautiful family.

And I want to share one more story with you. Many of you are familiar with Joni Erickson. She became a quadriplegic at age seventeen from a diving accident. She eventually learned to paint with her teeth, she's written over forty books, recorded several music albums, and she too, travels the world sharing her faith in God. In the beginning, she wanted so badly to be physically cured – fixed. She prayed and prayed, but nothing happened, physically anyway. But eventually she realized, "I was into Jesus just to get my problems and my paralysis fixed. I finally got the picture. To me, physical healing had always been the big deal, but to God, my spiritual condition is a much bigger deal." And so she started praying from Psalm 139: "Search me O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting." Joni opened

herself to allow God to purge her of attitudes and actions which contributed to her real brokenness. Of course, some of the well-meaning 'theys' in the world still want to pray for her to be physically healed. And she graciously accepts their prayers, but from the confines of her wheelchair she says, "Yes, please pray for me. But will you please ask God for healing of my peevish attitude in the morning when I wake up, of the times when I fudge the truth, of my sour disposition when there's too much work on my desk. Will you pray that I put to death the things in my life that displease God."

Yes, we all need healing of some kind. The physical and the spiritual are each part of God's divine concern and God's divine plan. And so, today, hear Christ say to you, "Be open." Be open to the touch of the Great Physician on your body. Be open to the idea that your physical ailment might not be the most important thing that needs healing. Be open to facing the truth about yourself. Be open to God's power to heal your brokenness. Be open to God's peace that passes all understanding. Amen.

*With thanks to Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, for her ideas and inspiration for this sermon.