

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

BEING OPENED

Mark 7:24-37

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost Analysis by Chris Repp

24From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, 25but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 28But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go-the demon has left your daughter." 30So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

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

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

Note: I have previously analyzed Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman as it appears in Luke's gospel. You can see that at <https://crossings.org/theology/2010/theolo796.shtml>. This time I challenged myself to stick to the second half of the pericope.

DIAGNOSIS: Closed

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Mute

It's hard to claim that muteness is a collective symptom of what's wrong with us in the 21st century. If anything, it seems the opposite is true: We can't shut up. The 24-hour news cycle keeps bombarding us with "news" from near and far. But what are they telling us? Anything important? Sometimes. But more often than not the talking heads are "talking a lot, but [they're] not saying anything," to quote the other Talking Heads. Might as well hit the mute button. What's the real difference between not being able to speak, and saying nothing of value when you do speak? And we're not any better, really, with our Facebook posts, and constant text messages and "tweets." Makes you wonder if our deafening muteness isn't a symptom of a deeper problem. Maybe Shakespeare's Macbeth was right, that the story of our whole life is "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Deaf

And while we bluster on, listening to ourselves talk and text and tweet about nothing in particular, we miss the voices of others. Not just the people next to us clicking on their computers and smartphones. Not just those with whom we shout

back and forth our differing political opinions. The world that we have constructed with our incessant, self-absorbed banter is deaf to much of the real world around us, especially those parts that don't fit easily into the dominant narrative: the poor, the unemployed and underemployed, the undocumented laborers, those suffering from disease, malnutrition, violence, oppression, and lack of opportunity in places we've never heard of and can't begin to imagine, not to mention those close at hand suffering in silence from depression and a host of different personal crises. As one of my favorite internet "memes" puts it, "I'm sorry, I can't hear you over the sound of how awesome I am."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Isolated/Marginalized*

Because we don't listen to each other, we have closed ourselves off from one another. Deafness leads to isolation. Wrapped up in ourselves and in our own little worlds, we don't know and don't care about the plight of others. And we're OK with that. The world we have noisily imagined suits us just fine (see John 3:19). We're happy to live in our own reality, and our own personal god blesses us in our blissful isolation. Unfortunately for us, the real God does not. The real God, one who equated loving God with loving our neighbor as ourselves, does not bless our deafness to the world around us or to the needs of the suffering. The deafness that has led us to marginalized others, has also led us to marginalize God. And God has returned the favor, turning a deaf ear to our private, self-serving prayers.

PROGNOSIS: Opened

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Reintegrated*

Into our isolation comes Jesus, the Word-made-flesh. But he does not simply add to the din of our meaningless sound and fury. Paradoxically, this Word becomes mute on our behalf ("like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before

its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” Isa. 53). Well acquainted with the suffering we have ignored, he endures the consequences of our isolating deafness for our sake. By his death and resurrection he opens again God’s heart to us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Hearing*

“Ephphatha,” says the risen Christ, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he sticks his fingers into our deafness. “Be opened now to the real world, to your suffering brothers and sisters, and so also to your God.” Now we shut up, and like a newly-cured deaf person we marvel at the new sounds of the world around us. We listen, and listening we hear.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Proclaiming*

Having been reconnected to God and to one another, we no longer live in little isolated worlds of our own imaginings. Connected to the real world, we now have something real to talk about. And we have real people to bear the Word to, in order to prove Macbeth wrong. Because of Jesus, and because his story has become our story, our lives are no longer signify nothing—because we have been opened to the world.