

September 6, 2009  
Lectionary 23b  
Mark 7:24-37  
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

## ***ALL EARS***

Even most Kindergartners can name the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and hearing.

We certainly use all five senses in worship, but we give priority to the ears. We hear scriptures proclaimed, hear sermons preached, hear music sung and played. Wouldn't it be fun to be *all ears* and hear you debrief the service, the sermon, the music, the news from social time on your way home from church or over brunch!

Think of all the sounds your ears hear in a typical day. Think about what it would be like to be deaf, to not be able to hear words or music. Volume or timbre. Accent or emphasis. Sounds of rushing water, soaring wind, roaring plane, cheering crowd.

In the movie *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, a man comes to the village doctor complaining that he cannot hear. The doctor finds a dried pea stuck in his ear--a pea that had been there for years. The doctor removes the pea and the man is cured and can hear again.

But later the man returns to the doctor. He is overwhelmed with the sounds of life: the bickering, the noise, the hassle, his wife's nagging. He can hardly stand it. Doctor, would you put the pea back in my ear, he pleads.

Sometimes it feels like we live with wall-to-wall sound. Up to our ears with stimulation and stress. And take a look at people walking down the street and notice what's coming out of their ears and what's up to their ears. Cell phones, iPhones, headphones, earphones, iPods. Not to mention the constant sound of radio and television. I wonder if we can even hear ourselves think anymore. There's so little silence. So little space to listen to the sounds of nature or the stirrings deep within us.

In a day when everything goes in one ear and out the other, how do we listen anew to the word of God? How do we hear the voice that gives calm assurance, the voice that reminds us of things that are eternal? How do we hear the voice that awakens and challenges us, the voice that beckons us out of our complacency? How do we hear the voice that reminds us of our baptismal call and mission?

So, give an ear. Lend an ear. Isaiah declares that when the messiah comes the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. And the tongue of the speechless will sing for joy.

And now open your eyes to hear the original shock factor in the gospel. After declaring that all food is clean and challenging some long-held religious beliefs, Jesus moves into pagan territory. An assertive, Gentile woman approaches him. If you're missing it, *she* would be considered *unclean*. She begs Jesus to do an exorcism for her daughter. But the Jesus of Mark's gospel makes a racial slur. In essence it means, let the children of Israel be fed first. Don't take the children's food and throw it to the *dogs*, meaning the Gentiles.

But the bold woman stands Jesus' insensitive comment on its ear: even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. Jesus can't believe what he is hearing. There aren't many times in the gospels when Jesus learns a lesson. But in Mark's gospel Jesus is not the omniscient God-man but the very human one whose identity as messiah is only known through his suffering.

The other character is also an outsider, a Gentile. He is deaf and has a speech impediment. Jesus uses an earthy, almost primitive remedy to bring healing. Jesus puts his fingers into the man's ears. Jesus spits and then touches the man's tongue. Then Jesus gives out an earthy, guttural groan of compassion and says "ephphatha", be opened.

If we keep our ear to the ground and seek wisdom and insight, what might we hear in these stories for our lives? Clearly there is a gospel message that is shocking. Jesus continues to cross boundaries. God's love continues to extend to people and places we would never have thought possible.

Who might those people be today? Who makes us most uncomfortable? Who pushes our buttons? Who do we exclude from our churches or from our lives? The poor, prostitutes, drug users, terrorists, strangers of all kinds.

But in this age of partisanship in both politics and religion, could we be also called to accept and welcome even those with whom we most fervently disagree. Those whose worldviews, political views or religious views could not be farther from our own? Perhaps even those in our denomination or family?

And could we also be called to be open to the parts of ourselves hardest to accept? The strange figures that show up in our dreams? The diverse, bizarre, insecure, needy and not so nice voices in us? Can we listen to what they have to say?

The words from our James reading may also cause you to perk up your ears. How often we exclude the poor and all those we judge by outer appearance. Last week we heard that it's more than hearing the word; it's also doing the word. And now, this week: faith without works is dead. If it goes in one ear and out the other, what use is it?

We gather today to learn how to listen. To unclog from our ears the distractions that in the end aren't very important. We can be so up to our ears in work and worry that we don't hear the voice of God. So we come each Lord's day to listen. To hear the word. To listen to the silence. To let the music of the hymns and liturgy refresh our soul.

And we come today, eager to hear Jesus say to us: ephphatha, be opened. That our ears may be opened and our tongues set free.

It's no surprise that the "ephphatha" ritual made its way into early baptismal rites and is still included today in the Roman Catholic liturgy. The minister touches the ears and mouth of the newly baptized and says these words: "The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God."

There is a song in *The Music Man* with these words:

*There were bells on the hill  
But I never heard them ringing  
No, I never heard them at all.  
Till there was you.*

Maybe having our ears opened is like falling in love. With life. With God. With a beloved.

Are you all ears? Are you amazed?

Opened to both the joys and sorrows of life, no wonder we sing as if we have a thousand voices, a thousand tongues.