

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2009

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Ephaphtha! Be opened! What have you heard recently that has really opened your ears to hear? Given all the conversations you have had, the stories, or even the music you have heard, what has not “gone in one ear and out the other” but somehow has opened your mind or heart to think more deeply about something or someone? What have you heard, listened to in a way that the words spoken, ideas expressed, music played have become something more than just “Noise”? You know the difference between “noise” that you need to turn off and sound that really does open you up instead of shutting you down.

In the past week or so, we may have heard Senator Kennedy’s funeral. We may have heard the Cardinal’s response to critics of his pastoral presence at the funeral. We may have heard debates on health care reform. Some reasoned, some more noise than anything else. Personally, we may have heard news of the recovery from illness of a loved one, or the news of a serious diagnosis. We may have heard of someone’s pain and loss at the death of a loved one. We may have heard of the joy of a family gathering over Labor Day weekend. We may have listened to a piece of music that keeps playing in our mind. Of course you can’t remember everything you have heard in the past week or so but think about the experience of having your ears opened to “really hear” and “really listen.”

Today’s gospel, of course, is on the first level a story of a man who can not hear nor speak having his ears opened and his tongue loosed in the encounter with Jesus. After the man is brought to him with the request that Jesus lay his hands on him, Jesus takes him aside, prays, puts his fingers in his ears and touches his tongue and he is able to hear and speak. This physical healing, of course, meant so much more to Mark’s community than just a miraculous happening. Symbolically it spoke of the manifestation of God’s kingdom happening in the present through the actions of Jesus. The words of the prophet Isaiah speaking of restoration and end of exile for God’s chosen people were becoming a reality. For those hearing the Gospel, the physical healing was a sign that the Kingdom of God was in their midst. This man was a tangible sign for all the disciples of Jesus that the Good News was being heard and proclaimed in such a dramatic way as this encounter of Jesus with the man who did not have physical hearing or could not speak.

Return for a moment to your memory of what you have heard this past week or so. Has anything you have heard spoken to you of the Good News, spoken to you of God's kingdom presence in the Hear and Now? That's H-e-a-r not H-e-r-e. Hear and Now. It is the experience of the man whose ears were opened. Hear and Now, what are you going to do? How will you become a disciple of the one whose presence and action for you enabled you to hear and speak? How will this encounter with Jesus give him more than just his physical hearing and speech?

And of course that is the question for each of us in the here and now: Hear and now what will we do? When we hear this gospel story, we may just think of this healing as something that happened to an individual 2000 years ago, or the impact that it had on Mark's community. But what about us? What is our experience of Jesus' taking us aside and opening our ears to hear his voice? And that is what is really important, isn't it? What difference does it make if Jesus opened the ears of someone 2000 years ago if he's not doing the same for us?

Last week when I was on my annual retreat I had one of those "Ephaphatha, Be opened" experiences. I had been complaining in my prayer to Jesus that I was really tired of trying to find him in the experiences of the gospel. It was feeling like ancient history. My question was "where are you in the 'here and now'?" "Where are you in the lives of people who really need you 'here and now?'" I was pretty cranky. Later on that day, I was out on the rocks of the retreat house listening to music and as I scrolled on my iPod, I came across a piece of music written to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. It was: *O Deus ego amo te, O God I love thee*. As I listened to the music and the text, I realized that I was not only "hearing" but was also "healing." The words of the poem, "then why should I not love thee, Jesus so much in love with me" resounded in my ears and in my heart. Could it be that Jesus, the Jesus to whom I was complaining about being so far off, distant and disinterested could be opening my ears to hear of his love for me?

I could go on and on about what happened next but maybe some other time.

What I would like to invite each of us to this morning is this: If Jesus were to take you aside put his fingers in your ears and touch your tongue, what would he want you to hear? What would he want you to say?