

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. ³⁴ And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." ³⁵ And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

During my fourth year of seminary, my wife and I had gotten involved with the CITI program, which was short for the Church Interpreter Training Program. Now, don't get the idea that we were fluent enough to do any translating yet – we were just taking the introductory class of ASL, which is American Sign Language. I don't remember much of it – it's like any other foreign language – if you don't use it, you lose it! Anyway, we were just finishing up the first or second night class to learn the ASL alphabet, deaf culture, and some rudimentary vocabulary. All of a sudden, so it seemed, the CITI program was being ended – and we weren't told why. Later on, it came out that it was because of a lack of funding, or a lack of students, or some other typical reason. Finally, the real story came out – some of the faculty members thought that it was a waste of time. You see, the Scripture says that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." They took this literally, and thought that those who

couldn't "hear" couldn't come to faith. Even though, ASL is just another language in which the Gospel can be preached to the nations. I was put in mind of this recollection from years ago when I read this text this morning, and how Jesus didn't let the cultural "norms" of the day get in the way of ministering to His people.

The religious leaders thought that if someone was debilitatingly crippled, it must be either the man himself, or his parents, that committed some grievous sin. Remember Jesus' ministry to the man born blind – He set the authorities straight that this was the work of the Evil One, to introduce such pain and suffering into this world. It certainly couldn't be pinned to this man, or his parents! In the same way, the man that was born without the ability to speak or hear didn't necessarily have any more sin than anyone else – he was just suffering from the sinful nature, the original sin of Adam and Eve that spoiled everything for everyone else. Jesus was determined to show that He had come to set His people free from the domination of sin in their lives, and so set about to heal this man of his horrible malady.

We see this similar healing often in our daily lives. From hearing aids for the elderly and the other "hard of hearing" folks, to Cochlear implants that have given the gift of hearing to so many folks, God has allowed many learned folks to use their skills to help others, that wouldn't have much hope of a "normal life" without them. We must just remember, however, that the knowledge and skill of these scientists and inventors doesn't come from within themselves – it is a gift of God. All glory and thanks for anything good that happens in our lives rightly belong to God Himself; we dare not take the credit ourselves. When something good occurs in our lives, it is the result of the actions of God; when something awful happens, it is a result of the devil and his influence. Let us dare not get these confused when we are interpreting things that happen in our lives.

But, back to the narrative before us. Let's take a look at a couple of details in this passage for our consideration this day, and see what the evangelist, Mark, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wants us to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest from it.

Jesus used what we today would call an “unorthodox” method of healing this man. He responded to the pleas of the crowd, that were begging Him to heal the deaf and mute man. It’s not like He made a habit of passing people by when they were in need – the Scriptures are full of examples of Jesus having compassion on His people that were deaf, blind, or crippled. But, these folks maybe hadn’t heard this – or maybe they HAD heard it. The fame and renown of Jesus had spread far and wide. They were out in the boondocks, near the Sea of Galilee – this wasn’t exactly downtown Jerusalem – word may have traveled more slowly out there. They might have thought that since they weren’t as notorious, Jesus might have been less likely to stop and heal their friend – after all, He probably wouldn’t get much out of it, at least from the leadership. He didn’t question healing the man – He just did it – no questions asked, unlike some of the other examples of asking the man what he wanted. Although, this man was probably not able to communicate like many of the others would have been able to.

He put His finger into the man’s ears, and then spit on it, and put it on his tongue. My first response would probably have been, “EWW!” From our modern, antiseptic tendencies, this was more than just getting intimately involved with the man, showing Him His care and compassion – it would be the equivalent today of the parent wiping a child’s face with their own saliva, but then doing this to a child of a stranger. I’m sure that at least some of the people were “weirded-out”.

I have to wonder if some of the reaction of the people was like Naaman when he was told by the prophet to wash seven times in the Jordan River to rid himself of leprosy. Naaman wondered if there was some other way; besides, he had much cleaner water back where he came from than the Jordan River was. This just didn’t make much sense!

Jesus didn’t hesitate – He touched the man (first of all, forbidden by the traditions of the time, if someone was sick, you just didn’t touch them, you’d be unclean yourself by such a gesture), then stuck His fingers into the man’s ears, then placed His moistened finger onto the man’s tongue. Imagine the

faith of the man that was deaf, to allow a perfect stranger to do this – sure, the friends encouraged Jesus to come and heal the man, but to do so in such a manner – I’m sure he must have been having second thoughts at this point. Even though they weren’t in the COVID hysteria that we are today, I’m sure that this would have been counter-cultural, or at the very least unexpected and unwelcome

Miracle of miracles – it worked! The man’s tongue was loosed; not only could he hear, but he could speak. No longer would he have to rely on interpreters, and be prevented from working for a living, and not dependent upon someone else for most of the necessities of his life. Imagine the freedom that the man must have had – it’s a miracle, all due to the care and concern and love of Christ the Savior of the world. This is one of the reasons why He came – to cure the sin of the world, to set right that which had been set wrong by sin. Of course, He would do this totally when He would die and rise on the cross, but the healings had two main points in the Scriptures: Prove that He was the Messiah, God Himself, doing things only God could do. Pointing ahead to the greater miracle, the miracle of miracles, that was going to happen in just a short time – He would die and rise again. Elsewhere, Jesus refers to this as the sign of Jonah – three days in the body of the great fish (the grave), and then arise and live once again. This was the most wonderful thing that could have been done for this man, but it was just a warmup for what was coming on the cross.

However, I’d like to draw a parallel for just a minute for this being Jesus doing what needed to be done to create and sustain faith. Think of Thomas, in the Upper Room – he said that he must be able to put his hands into the marks of the nails, and his hand into Jesus’ side, in order to believe. What was Jesus’ response? Sure – touch me and see! Jesus’ beckoning summons was what was necessary to reach out to Thomas’ doubting heart. We don’t know whether Thomas actually went through with this, but that doesn’t matter. Jesus was willing to have Thomas go through with it, and that’s all that matters – He was willing to do what was necessary. Jesus was willing, and did, touch the man born deaf and mute with his moistened finger, into some places that might be considered “personal”, and did it not

only to prove His divinity, but also to stop the rule of Satan that was controlling the man's body, with the horrible handicap of deafness and inability to speak clearly.

“Ephphatha, “be opened” – this was the word spoken by Jesus after He did the physical part of the healing of the man that couldn't hear or speak. In Michigan and Northern New York, there's a mission society that has this same name, that works with folks with the same disability. They do mission trips to Asia (used to be China, but they've had to withdraw to Hong Kong and other islands in the area, due to political reprisals). They're ministering to folks over there that are deaf and hearing-impaired – yes, there's quite a translation process, from English to ASL to Chinese Sign to Mandarin Chinese. And, yes, there is a different sign language for each spoken tongue! We had the head of this group come a number of years ago and speak about his activities over there – he even preached and sign interpreted his own sermon – talk about a task! People don't realize this, but there's more to interpreting sign language than just interpreting each word. It's a language of thoughts, not individual words – if you tried to sign each word, I think your hands might fall off (you'd have to go so fast!). Usually, even those who are fluent in ASL, one will speak, and another will interpret – it's just too difficult to think in both ASL and English at the same time. Usually, the “shorthand” involves signing the main concepts of a sentence, and not every word

Even though this disability is still with us, that doesn't mean that God has given up on these folks because He hasn't healed them completely. Sometimes God allows diseases and sicknesses to remain with us, because His greater purpose is served by allowing them to continue. Think of St. Paul with the “thorn in the flesh” – Paul begged for God to remove it from him, because it was giving him so much trouble. It was hampering his ability to minister to the folks that were so spread out. It was influencing his preaching and his ability to write – it was a pain that wouldn't go away.

What was God's response to Paul? "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Sometimes if we were healed of the malady that afflicts us, we'd become overconfident, and not realize that the strength to get up every day, and do our work, and serve God, comes from Him and not from us. Sometimes we're able to use our own sicknesses and illnesses to be examples to others, that we can continue to serve God even with the malady that's with us; or it can be a way to show others some "credentials" that we've "been there, done that" along with them when they're down.

It's not that God doesn't care; rather, it's that He has a much wider view than we have, both chronologically and eternally. He knows what will happen if we're cured, and what will happen if we're not. The most important point: the Christian faith is one of the cross, not of glory. We are told that we WILL suffer for the Name of Christ which we bear. We aren't told how that suffering will come, or how much will come. The point: just as our Savior suffered, so will we. However, just like our Savior, we will eventually reach heavenly glory, the end of all suffering and pain and illness. We strive for the Last Day, just like a runner in the Olympics leans forward to win the prize, so we strain toward the goal, which is with Christ, our Lord. The daily troubles and aches and pains and illnesses of this world PALE IN COMPARISON with the glories of heaven that will soon be revealed.

It's amazing how God never gives up on us, His children. He continues to work in our midst, to heal our various diseases and frailties, and removed our greatest illness ever, the disease of sin. If He chooses to remove our pain and suffering in this world through the training of doctors, nurses, scientists and inventors, then God be praised! But, if He allows us to suffer for a short time in this life, this trifle of time that constitutes our 80 or 90-so years, we have the promise that He will remove our sinful shackles forever in the glories of heaven to come. Just as He deigned to come to the man born blind and get up and close and personal with him, and remove his malady of not being able to hear or speak, so He gets up and close and personal with us. He comes to us in Holy Baptism, and washes away our sin, and

instills saving faith in our hearts. He comes to us intimately in the Lord's Supper, and places upon our lips the fruits of His Sacrifice on the cross of Calvary – His very Body and very Blood, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins. He blesses us beyond our ability to even comprehend it, and then gives us even more. All of this because of His great love, compassion, and care for us His children. He speaks "Ephphatha" to us when He removes our sin, just like He spoke it when He removed the deafness and speechlessness of the man in this Gospel reading. Same God; same love; same healing. Who are we to question why He doesn't remove our trifles from us, when He's removed the greatest one ever – condemnation to the fires of hell. What's more, He gives us the inheritance fit for a king, solely because of His love and His work on the cross for our salvation. So, we can understand the reaction of the crowd, and their disobedience of His pleas to not tell everyone what He had done quite yet – it's a natural reaction. Let that be so in our lives and vocations today. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace, that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.