

Goal: The hearers would more greatly trust in God’s miracle to open deaf ears.

In this morning’s Gospel we see Jesus healing a deaf and mute man, and we hear one of the funnest words in the Bible to say, “*Ephphatha*,” which means “*be opened*.” But ephphatha is more than just a fun word, it’s an important theological term, that points us to the miracle that God did for each of us in baptism. So, this lesson is about much more than just Jesus healing a physical ailment. Let me explain what I mean.

Do any of you have any family members or close friends who refuse to believe? I mean, you love them, but for years you haven’t seen any evidence of faith in their lives. And since you love them, you want them to be saved. So maybe you’ve taken on a strategy like mine, creating a threefold approach: patience, reason, force.

First, patience. I try to be as gentle and compassionate as I can with my approach. I want them to know that Jesus loves them, and that He wants to give them forgiveness. Sounds simple, right? But, they don’t listen. Instead, they make excuses like they don’t believe the Bible can really be trusted or that there isn’t enough evidence. So, I respond with a clear and intelligent, rational defense of the Bible. But for every question I answer, they come up with 10 more questions showing why they can’t believe and just won’t listen!

Now, you love these people right? But they repeatedly reject your gentle approach and they reject reason and logic. Now, if you’re like me, you fear for their soul. The only thing left is brute force. Maybe some tough love or some heavy law can finally open their hardened hearts. I imagine sounding like a guy with a huge megaphone shouting in their ear, “*repent or you’re going to hell*” and they’ll finally accept the truth of the Gospel!

But does that ever work? Does this brilliant three-fold process of making people believe in Jesus accomplish that goal? I’ve tried one or all of those things to give faith to my mother, sisters, and co-workers, and I can tell you that for all of my hard work and all my tears, they still don’t believe. Did I do something wrong? Why don’t they listen? Why can’t they just hear? Well, some people are just deaf to the Word of God, I guess.

Our Gospel deals with deafness as we see Jesus healing a man who cannot use his ears to hear or his mouth to speak. It starts like this, “***Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 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.***” (Mark 7: 31 – 32)

So, why did they need Jesus to heal him? Why didn’t they just speak compassionately to him? Maybe he couldn’t hear because people weren’t using gentle enough words with him? Or maybe the people who were talking with him weren’t clever enough or speaking logically enough with him, and he just needed someone to explain

things better? Or maybe they just weren't speaking loud enough? Maybe if they yelled louder, the guy would hear them. Sounds stupid, doesn't it? That's kinda the point!

Someone who's deaf can't magically hear just because you're nice in the way you talk with them, or because you make a reasonable point, or because you shout loud enough. They're deaf! That means they can't hear, no matter how you speak! Do you see where I am going with this?

The text continues, ***“Taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.” (Mark 7: 33 – 35)*** Jesus doesn't walk up to him and gently tell him why he should do to have faith or logically explain why he should believe. There's a hurdle in the way, and before faith happens, that hurdle needs to be removed. Jesus takes him aside, and with a single word, ***“Ephphatha,”*** he opens the man's ears! Now, He talk to the man.

Your sister, your parent, or your co-worker who doesn't believe can't hear the Word because there's a hurdle in the way. That hurdle is their sinful nature, the devil, and the world around us, that has plugged their ears so tightly that not a whisper gets by. So, who's fault is that? Maybe you think it's your fault. You haven't been praying hard enough, or you don't have enough faith, or maybe you accuse God.

Now, back to the text, back to the deaf man. Imagine for a moment that things happened differently. I mean, what if when Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears and said, ***“Ephphatha,”*** the man's ears were opened, making him ready to hear the Gospel, but then the man raises up his fingers and jams them firmly back into his ears! That's what's going on with your stubborn deaf friends and family and co-workers. It's not your fault. You are praying for them, you are reading the Bible. And it certainly not God's fault. His Word opens ears. But they're the ones who jam their own fingers back into their ear to ensure that they remain spiritually deaf.

People need to hear the Word of God to have faith. ***(“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?^[c] And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10: 14 – 17)*** But how can someone hear the Word of God if they've been made deaf to it? If they have been made spiritually deaf? You and I can't cure spiritual deafness. Nobody can, but God.

That brilliant three-step program of bringing God's Word, I shared at the beginning of the sermon, left out the most important step. Actually, without the first step, all of our efforts will be in vain, no matter how effective our methods are. Before anyone can receive God's Word, God first has to cure their deafness. And this is both scary and frustrating for us, we're not in control. We can't perform miracles and give hearing to the deaf! That can be scary, because it means that we don't get to decide who hears the Gospel.

But at the same time, the fact that we're not in control actually gives tremendous comfort. Sure, you may not be the one to provide the spiritual hearing, but God doesn't expect you to, *"that's not your kuleana!"* Your role is to pray to God that He would open the ears of our loved ones, but the burden of that work is on Him. God knows better than us what to do, and how to do it. God, knows our hearts before we even speak, and God knows best when and how to open the ears of the spiritually deaf.

God is in control. He will do the right thing at the right time. And when we trust in Him, we know that the whole world is in good hands. And God does open the ears of the deaf today, just as he did 2,000 years ago. He still speaks the same word, ***"Ephphatha,"*** and command ears to open.

A few weeks ago we witnessed the baptism of Evelyn Frietas into Christ's church. As her grandma held her, I poured water over her head and said, *"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"*. And just like the Christian Church has done for centuries, just like Jesus spoke to a man, alone and away from the crowds, He spoke to Evelyn, *"Ephphatha," "be opened."* And just like Jesus, just like our Church has seen over and over and over again, her ears were opened. You, who were here, saw a miracle performed by God, where spiritual deafness was cured. There, water was poured on her head, and her ears were opened to hear the Gospel, and her tongue was released to praise God with every little noise she makes!

In that same way, as baptized Christians, your ears are opened, your mouths are released to praise the One who healed you. God still works miracles today, and we can trust that He will continue to say, *"Ephphatha,"* and open the ears of the spiritually deaf.

So every time you see your sister, your mother, your brother, or your co-worker who will not hear the Gospel, love them, and trust God, and pray for healing. Let's do that now. *"Dear Lord, you are the great physician, you heal the body and the soul. Thank you for healing our Spiritual Deafness, thank you for giving us faith, please also heal those close to us. Open their ears, forgive their sins, and bring them to be with you one day in salvation. Help us to put our trust in you for all things, and to give the glory to you alone. Almighty Lord, Amen."*