

TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
MINOCQUA, WI
SERMON FOR SEPTEMBER 8 & 9, 2024

³¹ Jesus left the region of Tyre again and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of the Decapolis.

³² They brought a man to him who was deaf and had a speech impediment. They pleaded with Jesus to place his hand on him. ³³ Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd. He put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. ³⁴ After he looked up to heaven, he sighed and said, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!") ³⁵ Immediately the man's ears were opened, his tongue was set free, and he began to speak plainly. ³⁶ Jesus gave the people strict orders to tell no one, but the more he did so, the more they kept proclaiming it. ³⁷ They were amazed beyond measure and said, "He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak!" (Mark 7:31-37 EHV)

Been to the doctor lately? We look to doctors to **MAKE A DIFFERENCE**, to keep us healthy if we're just in for a physical or, if we're not healthy, to identify problems and fix them. Remember when doctors made house calls? I don't. Maybe some of you do. The only way to get a house call is to call 911, and then they come and get you and take you to a doctor.

The way it works today is you go to them. You call for an appointment, get put on hold, wait. Get in when there's an opening – might be days/weeks. Wait for that day to arrive. Go to the doctor's office, sign in. Wait. Staff gives you some paperwork to fill out, you show proof of insurance, wait. Go to a room in the back. Wait. Nurse comes in, takes your vitals, wait. Finally, the doctor comes in – you get his undivided attention for 5/10/15 minutes. He gives advice or writes a prescription or makes a referral and hopefully makes a difference. Oh, and one more thing. He gives you the chart/bill to take to the office staff. You look at it, calculate the difference it's going to make in your bank account and wonder how much a house call would have cost.

Jesus makes house calls. We find him in Mark 7 on the other side of the Jordan River, SE of the Sea of Galilee in a predominantly Gentile area known as the Decapolis, which means "ten cities." The typical Jewish rabbi sought to make a difference in Israel, among his own people. Not Jesus. His concern extends beyond his own people. Later, on the cross, he would make a difference for the entire world.

He's been here before. In Mark 5 Jesus cast a legion of demons out from a man and into a herd of pigs (2000!) who then jumped into a lake and drowned. People asked him to leave the area as that kind of thing wasn't good for the local economy. But the man who had been healed spread the word of what Jesus had done for him. This time, there are crowds of people seeking him out.

Friends brought a deaf and mute man to Jesus, pleading, "Please lay your hands on him and do whatever it is you do. We heard what you did with the demons. Please make a difference for our friend." And he does. Jesus takes the man aside, away from the crowds. He doesn't want to make a show. This isn't for the TV and the tabloids. What Jesus does is so different from the so-called celebrity "faith healers" of our day. He gives the man his undivided attention.

Jesus offers a personal touch, literally. He takes his fingers and sticks them in the man's ears, telling him, "I am going to make a difference. I am going to heal you here." Then he spits on his fingers and touches the man's tongue, telling him again, "I am going to heal you here." The Good Physician is at work. He is "hands on," not distant and removed. Touch is vitally important to healing, but is increasingly missing from medical care today. We get x-rayed and body fluids get extracted and sent to labs and we get crammed into MRI tubes, but are actually touched less and less, and only then with gloved hands. The hands that touch this handicapped man are the hands of God.

Jesus then look up to heaven with a deep sigh. Two things here. Jesus is directing the man's gaze heavenward, both literally and figuratively. He wants the man to understand that help comes from God and that he, Jesus, is the go-between, the mediator between God and man. He prays for us. He intercedes for us. He touches us with God's touch.

And then (2nd thing) he sighs. Jesus sighs. He groans. Not just at the wretched condition of the deaf and mute man. He sighs over the brokenness of all mankind, knowing the price he will have to pay to fix it. He knows the cost of this healing: a cross and His own death. Jesus knows our human suffering and sorrow. He knows our weakness. He groans on our behalf with profound sympathy over our sorrows, and trials, and troubles and sins. Isaiah wrote that he was ***"a man who knew grief, who was well acquainted with suffering....Surely he was taking up our weaknesses, and he was carrying our sufferings."*** (53:3,4) The writer to the Hebrews chimes in: ***"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin. So let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*** (4:15,16)

This man is about to experience such mercy and grace and healing at the hands of the divine difference maker. Jesus speaks a single word, and Mark records it in Aramaic – it's the exact word he spoke.. ***Ephphatha!*** ***Which means, "Be opened."*** (v. 34) Immediate healing. The word of Jesus is living and active. It is spirit. It is life. The man could hear, his ears were opened. He could now speak plainly, his tongue was loosed, and he couldn't stop talking.

But then Jesus does a most ironic thing – he orders the man not to speak about the miracle. He heals the man, loosens his tongue, and then puts a gag order on him and the others. Which was ignored. They couldn't help speaking about what they had seen and heard, especially this man who was hearing and speaking for possibly the very first time.

Jesus often did this, told people not to speak of the miracles he'd performed, for this reason: he did not want people thinking of him only as an ear/nose/throat specialist, a miracle worker, someone to make a difference for a little while here on earth. Jesus did far more than open ears and loose tongues. He came to speak Ephphatha over all of creation, to say to all of humanity, to you and me, "Be opened! Be released! Be free from the sin that enslaves you."

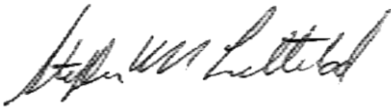
Isaiah saw the time of Jesus coming. In today's Old Testament reading, he bubbles over with enthusiasm: ***"Tell those who have a fearful heart: Be strong. Do not be afraid. Look! Your God will come with vengeance. With God's own retribution, he will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unplugged. The crippled will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy. Waters will flow in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland."*** (35:4-6) At the time of Christ's coming, God would touch people's lives with healing and miracles, but the biggest miracle of all? ***"He will come and save you."***

We've got to be careful of the idea of Jesus as finance guru, dietician, dispenser of wise sayings, insightful teacher, divine ATM or genie in the bottle (or the Book!) dispensing whatever it is we think is best for me/my life right now. WWJD – what would Jesus do? - takes a back seat to WDJ – What did Jesus do? All of our doubts, sins, weaknesses, failures – from the sinful nature we were born with to the actual thoughts/words/deeds that reveal us to be the damned sinners we truly are = all of this sin, evil, brokenness, despair, devastation. Jesus absorbed into himself.

He didn't do this in some antiseptic celestial transaction in a backroom boardroom out of view of the rest of the universe. He came here, God himself, in the flesh – touching, healing, forgiving. He allowed himself to be tempted, ridiculed, bloodied, beaten, rejected. His perfect life met the requirement of holiness demanded by the Father – for all. His death on the cross paid the price for sin demanded by the Father – for all. And on the third day – Ephphatha – be opened, tomb and stand empty. Echoes of the Ephphatha yet to be spoken on the Last Day, as graves everywhere will open up and give up their dead at the powerful Word of Jesus.

Do you see why Jesus didn't want the focus on a simple single miracle? That was much too small. It missed the point. It detracted from the big picture. And it was still too soon. There was more to come. But we can echo the praise of the people in Mark 7: **"He has done everything well!"** (v. 37) He's spoken Ephphatha to us in our Baptisms. He's opened our hearts to hear his Word. He touches our ears and lips in his Holy Supper – speaking forgiveness to our ears and placing his body and blood in with and under the bread and wine on our tongues. His Word/power/presence make a difference in our lives.

Where do you and I fit in? Can you and I make a difference? Oh, we're not miracle workers, but we can point others to the One who is. We're not all-powerful or omnipresent or all-knowing, but we know who is. And it is our privilege (and duty!) to point others to him. In merely pointing others to The Difference Maker – Jesus the Savior – you and I can make a difference in other people's lives. You know who your lost friends are. You know that person who is dying to have healing or life-defining purpose or esp., forgiveness of sins. So how can we help them? How can we make a difference? Keep it simple. Keep the focus on Jesus. Remember the power of Ephphatha – the Word of Jesus opens hearts and changes lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Stephen Luchterhand". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "S".

Pastor Stephen Luchterhand
Minocqua, WI