

Sermon for the Week of Christian Unity, 21.i.2007
Roman Catholic Cathedral Church of Saint Patrick / Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
7:00 p.m., Prayer Service for the Octave of Christian Unity
I Samuel 1:1-18, I Corinthians 12:12-29, Mark 7:31-37



The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark! Glory to
You, O Lord!

Then [Jesus] returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

They brought to [Jesus] a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech, and they begged [Jesus] to lay his hand on him.

[Jesus] took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and [Jesus] spat and touched his tongue.

Then looking up to heaven, [Jesus] sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."

And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more [Jesus] ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "[Jesus] has done everything well, he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

The Gospel of the Lord! Praise to You, O Christ!



Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come. ✠ Amen.

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-- Mark 7:33-34

The crowd had doubtless become used to the deafness of the deaf man and to his inability to speak properly, having never heard as single word but only seen words formed on the lips of others. The crowd was used to the sight of such people, and to their groaning attempts to communicate. And, perhaps the man himself had grown used to his plight, used to living in a world of sound he could feel but not hear, used to living in a world of speech he could only wonder at and see, but not share, except perhaps through

the written word. But, though he was in the midst of a crowd, he could not take part in the free and fast exchange of words, or even of grunts or laughter, able only to sound out a groaning sigh that might or might not be understood, depending on the intuitive powers and the empathy of those around him. Why not take him to the wonder-worker? What could it hurt? It might be good for a laugh if, as expected, the man remained as deaf as before, as silent in a world of speech as before.

They take him to Jesus, and Jesus receives him. But, Jesus will not give them a show. Instead, Jesus takes the man off somewhere in private, into a Synagogue perhaps, perhaps into a shop stall or a private home, or just down some alleyway nearby. And there, out of the crowd of humanity and the din of the human herd, somewhere

apart from everybody's regard for the man and such as he, somewhere away from those who sought out a miracle-worker but who may have expected no miracle, Jesus does a strange thing, beautiful and powerful in its strangeness, not what anyone would have expected.

There, in private, Jesus puts his fingers right into those ears that had not heard since childhood, since infancy perhaps, fingers that would teach and heal and forgive, fingers that would do all this and accuse the hypocrite besides with the authority of Almighty God. And, stranger still, Jesus commingles saliva from His own mouth, from the mouth that proclaimed the Kingdom of God, from the mouth *of* the Word of God, touching now this tongue and this poor mouth that wanted to speak but had never learned how. And, then, strange as well but

most beautiful and full of power, Jesus *sighs*, casting the sigh of that bound tongue up beyond the crowd and this world into the ear and the heart of the Father, *sighing* like one who is bound, and yet now breaking that bond so that the silence of that man's hearing and his speaking is broken, so that he may now join the rejoicing and the conversing, the joking and the gossiping, the hearing and the deep listening and the giving of a word of understanding that the crowd takes for granted. Restoring the man's hearing and the man's speech, God in Christ restores the man to his humanity in its noisy, ceaselessly talking community, disobeying His express command to keep silent about what Jesus had done as the man's first joyful act of freedom from silence.

We, who represent four or more great families of the Christian community, here at prayer with one another, once hardly knew how to hear one another, let alone speak, ask questions, disagree in love and respect. There having been so much suffering, inflicted by us on ourselves, so much deafness toward the other, centuries of not knowing how to begin to speak, what a miracle it is that the Holy Spirit has penetrated into the recesses of our deafness, as we see around us this night, in this holy house, and that we are finding our common language again through prayer and painstaking labor of love in dialog.

And how has the Lord of the Church accomplished this? He has taken us aside, out of a world that had grown comfortable with our divisions, only feigning indifference to divided Christianity. He has taken

us aside and shown us the loosened tongues of the martyrs, of Christian witnesses of the century just past unparalleled in their number in all of history, as Pope John Paul the Great has pointed out without ceasing and as his successor on the throne of Saint Peter has promptly reminded us with the clear intention that the whole Church should take notice that the blood of the martyrs still *is* the seed of the Church, and that from that seed a rich harvest is to be expected in hope.

Christ is taking us aside in our time and is opening our ears to hear again what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Churches through the martyrs' words of witness, Orthodox and Roman, Anglican and Lutheran and also those Christians who feared the great unity of the Church on earth but who are part of that unity now in the

Church Triumphant, words of faith and truth spoken to earthly power, words of forgiveness to the perpetrators spoken by the condemned, words that live again in the grammar and vocabulary of faith. It is these words above all that have made us who are blessed to live in peace ashamed *not* to find the power of Christian dialog again, as we pray for one another, as we question and hear one another in deeper understanding, as we hold one another up in mutual esteem before the One Who is our Judge and our Redeemer, the One Who alone can heal the wounds of our divisions and Who says to us, "Ephphatha! Be opened!"

✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has saved us by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever.

✠ Amen.

