

“The power to open” Mark 7:31-37

“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. And 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. And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today is a significant day for us as Grace congregation. Not only we celebrate Fathers’ Day, but finally after quite a few hindrances and delays we get to share and reflect on and all together shape our future – “The Way of Grace”.

Our today’s Gospel reading is very fitting to help us all together to reflect on who we are and why we are here, and where to keep our eyes focused as our gracious Lord Jesus Christ gently guides us into future. This account by Mark really is about you. About each one of us. Let’s see how.

We can read that together with His disciples Jesus had withdrawn to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Then they travelled to the region of Decapolis, to pagan cities. That is where this man who was deaf and had a speech impediment was brought to Jesus. They begged Him: “Can you help, please?!”

“Taking him aside from the crowd privately, Jesus 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.”

The Holy Spirit teaches us something profound about the Word of God. See, this man was deaf, he couldn’t possibly hear what Jesus said: “Ephphatha!” that is – “Be opened!” And nevertheless, against all odds, his ears were open, and his tongue were released, and he spoke plainly.

What is the Spirit teaching us, and how is this about us? He is teaching us about the power of God’s Word to open ears of those who are deaf, and to release the tongue of those who can’t speak. What happened with this man – all was the result of the power of God’s new life-giving words.

Our God speaks, and His speaking brings into existence something that didn’t exist before. This man didn’t cooperate with Jesus. He didn’t participate in what happened. Jesus spoke His healing words and he simply received God’s gift.

It was the power of Jesus’ words that changed the reality. The man was deaf, and then he could hear. He couldn’t speak, and then – he was able to speak plainly. And what happened in between was that... God spoke. Jesus spoke.

This is your story too. Similar account could be written about each one of us. What do I mean by this? Sure, this account by Mark is about the man who was physically deaf, and with a speech impediment. God's speaking changed it.

How does this apply to us? Scripture is clear about our state as we come into this world – we all are dead in our sins, we can't hear, we can't understand what our God is saying to us, we don't even want to hear and understand, and surely, we can't speak God's words, we can't speak God's message plainly.

That's all of us. That was our state. But now you are here. Listening to our God, and we can hear Him. The world cannot! We are not only able to understand the language that is spoken to us, we understand the message, it speaks to us.

How is that possible? Because the Triune God has spoken to you His life-giving words. When you were still dead in your sins, deaf to the Gospel message, our God came to you and spoke new life into you. When did this happen?

For many of us that was our Baptism. Remember how we say it in our Baptismal liturgy? There is a section that is called "opening of ears and mouth". "The Lord made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. Therefore, in His name I say: Be open, so that you may hear and speak the Word of God." God speaks and our ears are open and tongues released.

For some our God may have spoken in another situation. Through a friend sent to you by our gracious Father. By reading or hearing the message. Our Lord is generous and very determined to bring His beloved into His family. He desires wholeheartedly that all people would know the truth and be saved.

Thus, He spoke to you too. You may or may not remember when it happened, but that was Him who called you. He sent His Spirit to create a new heart in you, to enable you to hear and to understand and to speak the message of Jesus.

This is the lesson from this account. We often focus on the question: "What does this mean?" What does this or that part of God's Word mean? And we tend to forget about the other question, which is at least as important.

"What does the Word of God do?" That's it! Because the Word of God is active and powerful, it kills the sinner and creates a new life out of death. And this active and powerful Word of God, Jesus Christ, has spoken to you.

He has made you alive, able to hear and speak the truth of God, and what is even more, and this is incredible, and what a shame that we are so used to it and are not breath-taken by hearing this – He has entrusted His life-giving, ears-opening, tongue-releasing words to us. To each one of you.

He has placed His words on your tongue. When you speak Jesus' message, those words are wrapped in and delivered by the Holy Spirit Himself. He takes them from your lips and puts them into ears of those who listen to you.

Then He takes them to their hearts, and we may witness the miracle of new creation taking place; when someone who was dead in their sins, deaf to God's message, receives the spark of new life, of eternal life at that. What a privilege

to be found worthy of the Father's trust! Now, remember how Jesus spoke to and about His disciples. "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples." That remaining in Jesus' words is like remaining in light.

Think about this analogy! We are in light as long as we are exposed to or are in the presence of the source of light. We can't take light with us. We can't store it for later. We can't depart into darkness and excuse ourselves saying that once we were in light, and therefore that should suffice for us. Not at all!

We need to stand in light. We need to be in Jesus' presence to keep abiding in His words. Then His words will keep bringing to us His life-giving power. This is who we are and this is why we are here, and this is where our focus needs to remain, by God's grace, – on the words of God who is our Father.

How do we do this? This is what our "The Way of Grace" is all about. It helps us to focus on what is truly important. Thus, we stand in light in the presence of our God, when we respond to His invitation and allow Him to serve us, gladly receiving His gifts. Right here.

We ask about the Divine Service – what does this do? What does the Word of God do for us and with us in the Divine Service? It reveals our sickness, our sin, it delivers to us God's forgiveness and good conscience, it fills us with gladness as we hear of God's unconditional love towards us, and it unites us with Him.

But our Lord is abundant in His grace. It is not just one way He blesses us. He invites us to gather around His Word, so that He can teach us, share His divine wisdom with us, make us wise and gracious, more and more like Jesus.

He also gathers us in His family. Look around! He has given you all these people whom you see here, and many others. So that through them He can love you, support you, comfort you, and care for you. In the same way He sends each one of us to bring His gifts to others, the chief one being His life-giving Gospel.

It is our God Himself who unites us with Him in prayer, it is His Spirit who enables us to pray, makes us humble, less selfish, slower to anger and quicker to forgive and ask for forgiveness. All of this happens in Christian fellowship if we remain in the light of God's Word.

But then, as our Father showers His gifts upon us, He also helps us to take our eyes off from ourselves, and turns them to all the people that He has placed in our way. The Father provides for us so richly; Jesus loves us so self-sacrificially that it changes us and we long to share this love and God's gifts with others. Serving them, however we can.

And the greatest gift that we as Christians can give to anyone is ... the gift of eternal life. For you have the words of eternal life spoken in your ears and placed on your tongues, and the Holy Spirit Himself helps us to speak plainly.

He Himself fill us with joy and passion to tell the world... that this Jesus "has done all things well." Just think about this, our Father has allowed us to participate in building His Kingdom, in gathering His chosen people to the feast

that will have no end. He does it as a loving parent, not demanding from us results, taking all responsibility upon Himself, while we can enjoy the journey without any pressure. What a privilege! This is why we are here. All the above.

To gladly receive and rejoice in all the abundant blessings of our Triune God, to abide in His words, to remain in the light of the presence of Jesus Christ, so that through us His goodness flows to others. Beautiful, heart-warming and humbling picture. This is who we are... this is our way.

Now, before we finish, just a quick examination – do we live up to what we are chosen and called and blessed to be and do? Do we? We reflect on these questions regularly in our Confession and Absolution.

“Do I despise the Word of God by paying little or no attention when it is preached or taught? Do I make attending the Church’s worship a low priority in relation to other things? Am I ashamed to confess Jesus out of indifference or cowardice before those who believe differently? Do I bring every worry and concern to God in prayer, or do I neglect prayer altogether?” And so on...

What do you say? What is your answer? Too often we have failed. Me, you, every Christians. We haven’t appreciated God’s gifts. We haven’t rejoiced in wonderful privileges entrusted to us. We deserve His wrath... All that is true.

This is why our Lord and our Brother Jesus Christ comes to you not only weekly, but daily and speaks to you. “I know that you have sinned against me in your thoughts, words and deeds. I know where and how you have failed me. More, I know how many times and in which ways you will fail me in future.

But know this, whatever happens, I will never abandon you, nor turn away from you. I want you to know, here and now – I forgive you. I forgive you everything. I take away your guilt, your shame, your fear. I do all of that. I wash you clean with my Spirit, and I restore your innocence. You are forgiven!

And you are loved and valued and appreciated more than you know. I look at you and delight in you. Me and my Father are waiting to receive you and to show you your eternal home. You are good enough for us. You are very good.”

This is what Jesus wants you to hear and remember every day. “Your past can’t accuse you. Your future can’t scare you,” Jesus says, “because you are mine, and I am yours, and no one will be able to separate you from our Father’s love.”

You are cleansed and purified, you have received God’s life-giving words, the Holy Spirit has embraced you in the divine fellowship with the Trinity, and you are free to live as someone who is loved beyond comprehension.

Let this be our “Way of Grace”. Marked with joy and gratitude, with peace and courage, with beauty and holiness, with open ears and released tongues, always remaining in the light of God’s Word.

Amen.