

From Isolation to Vibrant Life

Trinity 12
Mark 7:31-37

#1111 (#1035, rev.)
26 August 2007

If you cannot hear and speak, you're pretty much cut off from everyone around you. That was the problem of the deaf-mute man in our Gospel reading. Other people could talk, but the deaf man could not hear them. He could try to speak in his muffled, muted speech, but the people around him could not understand a word he said. The poor man was pretty much isolated in his own little world. He led quite the lonely life...until Jesus. When Jesus came along, He healed the man and freed him from his life of lonely isolation. Not only did Jesus heal the deaf-mute man by restoring his hearing and speech, but He also ushered him into a new and vibrant life. When the Son of God, the Lord of creation, opened the man's ears and loosed his shackled tongue, He escorted the man into a vibrant life of hearing and talking with God and other people.

Just as our gracious Lord healed the deaf and mute man, He also heals us. What He did physically for the deaf man in Gentile territory, He does spiritually for us week in and week out. Not only does He open our ears to hear Him and His message of mercy, but He also rescues us from our isolation. Not only does He loose our tongues to sing His praises and confess Him to others, but He also ushers us into vibrant life with Him and each other.

The deaf man's deafness was certainly a result of Adam and Eve not listening to God in the Garden. His permanent state of being tongue-tied—literally and physically—was a result of Adam and Eve using their tongues to taste the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, the one tree about which God said, "You shall not eat of it." So when Jesus takes this man aside, puts His fingers in his ears, spits, and touches his tongue, our gracious Lord reverses the age-old plague of sin and death. It's a plague that closes our ears and shackles our tongues. It's a plague that isolates us from God and from one another.

Perhaps you've noticed this plague of isolation when you talk with other people. Perhaps

you've had times when you and a family member are just not communicating well. You know that you're both speaking English; your mouths and ears are functioning fine. You can hear and understand each other's sounds and syllables. But for some reason he or she is not hearing what you're saying, and you're not getting what he or she is talking about. In this way, you're isolated from each other.

Such conversations lead to frustration and misunderstanding. Then, instead of listening to what the other person is actually saying, you're planning your response to something said earlier, or you're strategizing how to make your next point or "win" your case. Or, perhaps worse yet, as the other person is talking, your mind is off in a galaxy far, far away, wondering what's for dinner when you get home. Your ears and tongue may be working just fine, but it's still isolation.

Sometimes we even work and play in isolation from the people who are nearest and dearest to us. For some strange reason, my family has decided to leave me alone when I'm watching the news or when I'm really into a good Rams game. I'm sure they've said many things at those times that I just haven't heard. And when they do get my attention, I don't even have to untie my tongue as I say, "Huh?" ☺

Our isolation really shows up when we get upset with what other people say to us. A friend may say something as a matter of fact, but we take it as a put down or an insult. Or maybe we take it as an obstacle to some dream or hope that we have. Perhaps you invite your friends over to play cards this Labor Day holiday. They say, "We can't make it because of a prior commitment." In your isolation, you start wondering things like, "Am I not good enough?" or "What's wrong with me?" It's the isolation of our sin and death.

This isolation especially separates us from God. When we get so wrapped up in our own little world of daily demands and weekly

schedules to keep, listening to God in His Word is the farthest thing from our mind. We may talk a lot, for hours, day in and day out, with loved ones or friends or colleagues, but talking with God in prayer? We tend to put that off, or tell ourselves that we don't know how to pray, or that we're not that good at it. Do you ever think or feel like your tongue is shackled when you pray? It's our isolation of sin and death.

But just as Jesus healed the deaf-mute man, He also heals us. Just as our merciful Lord had compassion on the man isolated in his deafness and silence, He also cares enough to rescue us from our sin and death. Remember, this is the same Son of God who joined Himself to our human flesh and blood to restore it to God's original design. This is the same Lord of mercy who endured the isolation of His closest disciples as they fled from Him. This is the same Lord who hung on a cross carrying the whole weight of humanity's sin all by Himself. This is the same Savior who plunged into the deep, dark isolation of death in order to open the graves of Adam and Eve and all the dead so that His vibrant life might burst forth for all to enjoy.

This same Jesus comes to us in our Baptism. He puts His fingers into our ears, spits, and touches our tongues even as the Spirit-filled waters cleanse us from sin and give us life. And with our ears opened and our tongues loosed, we are brought into the Lord's Church. Here we are no longer alone, no longer isolated. Here we get to enjoy the vibrant sounds of God's Word and the joyous notes of praise sung by people around us. Here we learn how to live in harmony one with another.

This same Jesus comes to us in Confession and Absolution – and I'm not just talking about the general Confession on Sunday mornings. I'm especially talking about when you come to your pastor to receive the Holy Absolution in private. Here you get to confess those specific sins of not listening to God or to your loved ones, friends, or co-workers. Here you get to confess your many ways of isolating yourself from God and your fellow Christians by your thoughts, words, or deeds. And when you confess, your pastor speaks our Lord's healing

words into your ears. It really does not matter that your pastor is a sinner like you; what matters is what your Lord does. In the words of Holy Absolution, your Lord Jesus again puts His fingers into your ears to open them up. And when your ears are opened in the forgiveness of your particular sins, you get to enjoy the vibrant sounds of life with God and renewed life with people around you.

And in the Eucharist, your Lord Jesus again touches your tongue so that it can speak and sing His praises and then build up your neighbor. Think of that as you come to the Lord's Table this morning. With His very Body and Blood under the bread and wine your Lord is loosing your tongue from those unkind, bitter, even judgmental words you might speak against someone near and dear to you. Thus unshackled from such sins, your tongue has new life to thank and praise God. Your tongue has new life to speak kindly to and about people around you. Strengthened and fortified by Christ's life-giving Body and Blood, you can use your tongue to declare the wonderful deeds of our Savior. As we sang earlier: *"Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing / My great Redeemer's praise, / The glories of my God and King, / The triumphs of His grace! // My gracious Master and my God, / Assist me to proclaim, / To spread through all the earth abroad, / The honors of Thy name"* (LSB 528:1-2).

In the daily prayers of the Matins liturgy, we begin with these words: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise." That's what our tongues were made for! But we don't do that in individual isolation. No, we get to speak, sing, and praise in the Lord's Church. Later in the Matins liturgy we hear what our ears are made for: "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it. Lord, I love the habitation of Your house and the place where Your glory dwells." Yes, when our Lord opens our ears and looses our tongues, we are rescued from our isolation. We are restored to life with Him; we are rejoined to the people around us. Now we get to listen well to our loving Lord and to our neighbors. Now we get to speak God's wonderful deeds as well as build one another up in love. Amen.