

Here's How I Heard It....

[Text - Mark 7:31-37]

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My grandson Quinn would describe this morning's New Testament reading as "Icky, but totally awesome!" [At least those are his favorite expressions of late.] Jesus' actions *are* a bit messy! He sticks his fingers into a man's ears; then he spits on his fingers and touches the man's tongue. Let's face it, that is icky! But obviously Jesus knows what he's doing, because the results of those actions are totally awesome! A man who couldn't hear a thing, or speak clearly, now hears and speaks without difficulty. Perhaps it's because the man can't hear, that Jesus decides to put his fingers into his ears - to physically communicate his intentions. And that *saliva*, becomes a healing *salve*, which graphically demonstrates Jesus' deep desire to touch this person in a therapeutic way. In other words, Jesus goes to great lengths to make sure this individual understands that he isn't there to do him harm, but to enhance and elevate his life. Through this encounter Jesus shows that he is willing to overcome any barriers that might separate him from that man, or separate that man from the people around him. Jesus meets this individual right where he is, looks him squarely in the eye, and says, "Ephphatha - Be opened!" And with that command, the man's ears are opened, his tongue is unbound, and his life is forever changed.

By personally reaching into this man's silent world, Jesus breaks through his isolation, removes the barriers, and opens-up for him the possibility of full inclusion within his community. Before Jesus touches him, this man was most likely an outcast - one who probably had to beg for his survival - one who may well have questioned his own self-worth, because of his obvious differences - one whose true value as a cherished child of God would have been doubted by those around him. Not only didn't this man hear what they heard, or speak the way they spoke; his "differences" would have been attributed to some kind of divine displeasure or punishment. Yet Jesus refutes all of this, by his willingness to physically - and spiritually - engage him; and by issuing that short, yet powerful command, "Ephphatha - Be Opened!" And this specific command isn't just directed toward that one isolated child of God. It is meant for that man's entire community, and for all God's children of every place and time: "Ephphatha - Be Opened!"

You and I, along with every person on this planet, are called to be *open* - to be released from any impediment that blocks our living, or hinders our loving. Our ears are to be open - to truly hear the Good News of Divine Compassion and Grace. Our tongues are to be set-loose - to boldly proclaim that this Grace is intended for *all* people. Our spirits are to be set-free - so that we might passionately work together to remove those barriers and judgments that separate us from one another. And our community is to be energized and mobilized - so that more and more individuals, and communities can clearly hear and faithfully communicate the Divine message of openness, welcome, and Life-affirming Love.

In 1991, the members of Brecksville United Church of Christ proclaimed this congregation to be "Open and Affirming" of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people. Now I realize, that in the eyes of some critical Christians, this openness to *all people* makes us a bunch of hopeless, hapless, helpless hell-bound heretics - to which I say "hallelujah!" Throughout its 199 year history, this congregation has been a community of faith where a person's Infinitely Divine Value isn't questioned because he or she is "different". It's a place where we seek to value people *because* of their differences. We don't expect -

or desire - that all of us will hear, or speak, or be “the same”. [How boring would *that* be?] Yet we certainly hope that we will all strive to speak openly and honestly, and that we will truly try to hear what each other has to say. I realize this isn’t always an easy thing to do; however, I do believe that you and I - as people of faith - are called to help raise the bar for civil and compassionate communication within our larger society.

For example, I personally find it hurtful and maddening when I hear other people - often in the name of *God* - trying to deny the basic human dignity and civil rights of LGBT people. Yet I must also acknowledge the harm that is caused when so-called “open-minded” people totally vilify and dehumanize anyone who speaks against us. If you and I simply lash-out with fear and anger at those who oppose us - because of their *own* fear and anger - we won’t get very far. So I must constantly remind myself that I can’t close *my* mind - or my heart - to those whose minds and hearts are closed. I must “Be Open” to the Divine Power of forgiveness and hope, compassion and grace. And while I firmly believe that it’s my sacred duty to vigorously challenge anyone who promotes prejudice or injustice, hatred or violence, I also must recognize that it is *God’s* job to ultimately change them.

In this morning’s reading, it’s interesting that as Jesus opens-up this one man’s ability to communicate, it’s as if the ears and tongues of everyone else present are also opened. And the more Jesus tells them to keep quiet, the more passionately they proclaim the Good News: “This Jesus does everything well! He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak!” For the people of Israel, these healing actions are unmistakable signs of the Divine Presence, which was foretold by Isaiah and the other prophets of old; therefore it’s not going to be easy to keep this quiet. Once the wider community sees and comprehends the amazing compassion, power and grace which Jesus Christ embodies, this Good News *will* spread, and grow, and begin to change people’s lives in ways that are undeniably wholesome!

Immediately after he heals this man, Jesus orders those who witness it, to “tell no one!” Apparently, the time wasn’t quite right for spreading

the word about who Jesus was and what his message fully signified. Unfortunately - centuries later - we in the Church often seem quite content to continue to follow that outdated, initial order, and “tell no one!” Well, this morning I’m here to tell you that this “don’t ask, don’t tell” order was officially rescinded on the first Easter morning! When the Light and Love and Life of Jesus Christ breaks through the bonds of darkness, fear, and death, the reverberations are going to be loud! Today, our standing-order is: “*Ephphatha*: Be Opened!” That’s right! Not only are you and I permitted and encouraged to open-up and embrace Christ’s Good News, but we are actually commanded to do so! To listen to it with fresh ears, and to respond to it with completely open minds and hearts. To be an active part of Christ’s healing, welcoming, and Life-changing ministry.

The great thing about this, is that you and I don’t need to worry about having the “right” religious language to carry this ministry forward. Religious jargon and theological certitude will not change the world! The *surest* way for people to share the Love and Faith of Jesus Christ, is to show the same compassion, openness, and grace that Jesus reveals throughout his entire life. When you and I get this right, the people around us are much more likely to get it right as well. And as my grandson Quinn would say, “*That* is totally awesome