

BE OPEN, BE DOERS
Year B, Proper 18, September 10, 2006, Grace Church, Haddonfield
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today's Gospel presents us with a story of Jesus healing a deaf man. It is one of those powerful miracles that have deep meaning for us. I had the privilege of working with the deaf for several years in my last parish. Think about what it would mean to be deaf ... unable to hear. Most of us can't imagine what it is like. We wouldn't be able to hear our children, our lover, and our friends when they spoke to us. Our favorite music, television show and more would be severely limited. Our favorite prayer, hymn or reading would be lost to us. To be deaf is to have not only limited communication, but also limits in life and opportunities. If you ask a deaf person one thing that they wish they had, they all respond "Our hearing!"

Let me share a story that a deaf friend gave me. One day, a man went to the doctor. He said he thought his wife might be going deaf. The doctor suggested the man give her a test to make sure. He told the man to approach her from the back speaking to her. The closer he had to get to her, the more serious the deafness. The man agreed to try it out. When he returned home, he opened the front door and called out to his wife, "Honey, I'm home! What's for dinner?" There was no answer. He knew she would be in the kitchen, so he moved closer to the next room and called out, "Honey, I'm home! What's for dinner?" Still no answer, and he was growing concerned. He went into the kitchen and saw her bending over the kitchen, preparing food. He called out again to her, "Honey, I'm home, what's for dinner?" His wife turned around and spoke to the man, "For the third time ... chicken!"

Who's deaf in this story? Who's not hearing? Sometimes we assume others are deaf, when in reality, it may be us who are deaf. In the Gospel of Mark today, there are several levels of understanding. First, there is the deaf man who is healed. A miracle takes place when Jesus heals a man who couldn't hear. But there is someone us who doesn't hear ... Jesus' disciples. Mark points out several times in his writings that the disciples just didn't understand Jesus. They misunderstand him; they don't hear what he has to say. Finally, there is the level of deafness to which we belong. We too often are deaf to what Jesus has to say. We can't or won't hear what he has to say to us.

It is into this world of deafness, with its many levels that Jesus comes. The key to hearing are his own words ... "Ephaphata!" ... "Be open!" Jesus acts in the deaf man's life and he is healed ... opened to a new life! What happens to him after this miracle? He can't keep quiet! He proclaims to all (who will listen) what has happened! What deaf person wouldn't want to hear? Do we want to be healed of our deafness?

The undercurrent here is the deafness that infects the disciples and us. Either we can't hear Jesus or we choose to ignore him. Whatever is the case, we are missing out on new life. In our culture, there is so much noise that it's hard to hear at all! It crowds out our ability to listen, to hear. No wonder we don't know what God wants! I'm old enough to remember when they first said that loud rock music would make us deaf. Now we live in a noisy world with cars, television, radios, CDs, ipods, mp3 players and cell phones. There is plenty of noise, but do we hear the life giving words of Jesus?

What do we hear today? Do we hear the cry of the poor in Camden, the poorest city in the nation? What's it like to listen to a hungry child, or poverty stricken mother, or a man without

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hope? Do we heart the cry for peace in so much of the world? Maybe it's Iraq, or the Middle East, Dafur, or Sudan, South America or North Korea. What's it like to heat bombs going off daily? Gunshots? Planes? Tanks? Do we hear the cry of the sick, the mentally ill, the disabled and the grieving? What's it like to wrestle with the voices in our head?

Where will the healing and hope come from? From God. Will Jesus be able to heal us all? Yes. What will take to make us open? A miracle!

The Scripture lessons leave us with two things to do in living the Christian life this morning. First, we are called to be open. Mark's Gospel stresses our need to learn to listen. This has to be done in a way that is nonjudgmental, open and realizes our need for God. We can make ourselves open to a God moment ... and this means LISTEN! Here today, we can hear God in the bible readings, or prayers, or sermon, or hymns ... we are spiritual people and God speaks to us. Being part of a community that listens for God marks the Christian life.

Listening has be an active approach on our part. What do we hear? What does our community have to say about it? Are we listening to each other? If we can be open, we will hear what god wishes of us and more!

The second aspect of the Christian life has to do with what the Letter of James says today ... become doers, not just hearers. It is not enough just to hear what God and Jesus have to say ... we have to put it into action in our lives. Too many people listen and do nothing. You know what this is like ... especially if you are a parent, a teacher, work with large groups of people and so on! We need to make faith a verb! We are called to ACT!

Living the way of Jesus means to hear his words and then apply them. This might meant that we become part of a miracle for others. It might mean deep and significant change for us in our lives. Out actions might compel us to care for the poor, make peace instead of war and to care for the sick. The possibilities of action are unbounded! To be a Christian is to be part of a community of action!

We now must ask ourselves what we will do. One way is to being a more profound faith community. Last year I traveled with the family out to Lancaster to vacation. We drove north of the area to a town of Ephaphata. It was a German religious community that was founded during the early part of our nation's history. These immigrants came here to establish the perfect Christian community. Their ways and teachings may not exactly what we do, but they were seeking to be open to God in a meaningful and purposeful way. What would it look like for our community to be open to God and open to others?

Another way to live the Christian life might be through identifying a group of people to work with. Think about what it would be like to work with the deaf. We have to open ourselves to a new way of being. Openness takes effort and often means we have to suspend ways of thinking and changing ways of doing! With the deaf, it is okay to touch someone on the shoulder to get their attention. We shy away from touching people in our culture, but here it is necessary. With the deaf you have to look them in the face and concentrate on the person in front of you. Have

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you ever been to a party and notice how many people “talk” to you while scanning the rest of the room? Working with the deaf taught me how important it is to concentrate on the person in front of you!

To get the deaf’s attention, you can flick the lights off and on. Remember, they can’t hear ... but they can see! To be open and to be doing might mean rethinking how we do things. By the way, it doesn’t help to talk LOUDER and SLOWER with the deaf! They can’t hear ... remember? One thing you can do is pound on the table or stomp on the floor. The deaf can feel vibrations! To work with deaf means you have to learn a new language. Let’s practice right now, move your head up and down, what does this mean ... YES! Now move your head left and right, this means ... NO! Now make this motions of the hand towards yourself ... this means ... come here! Hold up your hand with the palm facing outward, this means ... stop! See! You already know some sign language! Now we can become advocates for the deaf and help to incorporate them into our community!

The call today is to be open and be doers. We can open ourselves, open our Church and live into the life that Jesus calls us to. We do this for ourselves, for others and for the world. To be a Christian is to be open, to listen to what God has to say, and then to do, to put our faith into action! Good luck and may God bless us in our efforts!