

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity with the Rite of Confirmation for James Long
30 August, Anno Domini 2020
St. Mark 7:31-37
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sometimes the simplest and clearest truths are the ones that we struggle against the hardest. Selfishness brings loneliness. Children need mommies AND daddies. What is popular isn't the same as what is good. In the Gospel appointed for today, Jesus demonstrates a very important truth that we have to always be mindful of - speaking the truth comes only by hearing and hearing only by the Word of Christ. The man's speech was impeded because he couldn't hear what rightly ordered speech sounds like. He was forced to try to figure it out on his own which left him making sounds no one could understand.

If we are to speak rightly, we must first listen. That should seem pretty self-evident. After all, don't children have to first hear the words of grown ups before they are able to start speaking them on their own? Don't they have to be taught how to put the letters and words and sentences together? It's funny listening to children as they are trying figure out language. They put words together that are completely unrelated. And usually there isn't any real consequence other than a frustrated toddler who can't express himself and what he wants.

It's really no different for us as children of our heavenly Father. We aren't born knowing the language of heaven. The truth doesn't come naturally to us. In fact, as sinners we hate the language of heaven. But if we are to be saved we have to learn it. Someone must teach it to us. This is what preaching and teaching is all about - teaching the language and grammar of the true Christian faith so that we may rightly confess who God is, who we are, and what God has done for us in Christ. Parents and heads of the house, this is your single greatest responsibility for those under your charge - giving them the language of the Scriptures so that they know the truth and can recognize the lies. This is why as a congregation we are going to begin learning by heart the catechism and verses of Scripture. All of us need to hear what God says and how HE says it so that we can believe and say it correctly and recognize when it's spoken incorrectly.

This speaking has life and death consequences - eternal life and death. This is why God gave the Third Commandment. We need to hear AND learn the Word which God our Father speaks. How can we consider ourselves Christians if we can't be bothered to learn our Father's Words, words which are and give life? God wants us to RIGHTLY confess our sin so that we may RIGHTLY believe and confess our salvation. That is why God speaks. He speaks so that we may hear and by hearing be saved. Apart from God speaking we would be lost eternally. Woe to any who have been given the responsibility to speak but refuse and try to push it on to someone else. God will not hold such a person guiltless.

The things of God are foolishness to the natural man because it is the Spirit who discerns them, the Spirit given BY THE WORD. Ears stopped up by sin and pride and greed produce only tongues that speak falsehood, tongues that cannot speak rightly about God. Indeed, such tongues only curse God and speak falsely of Him, give Him false names, attribute to Him false works, and give His glory to others. Our ears must be first opened by the Word of Jesus so that we may hear His voice and His voice alone as truth. Then, and only then, having our ears opened by the command of Christ "Ephphathah!", receiving the Holy Spirit in the waters of Holy Baptism, are we finally able to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and speak rightly of Him.

We are born knowing the language of selfishness and desire. We are born wanting to talk about "me" and what I want and what I think. We are born knowing Satan's language filled with words of pride and lying, gloating, and self-preservation. Our ears are filled with the perverted and deceiving words of our demonic father and the foolish wisdom of his world. That isn't the language of God. That is the language of death and pain and misery. And that is the language that our sinful flesh finds comfortable and natural and satisfying. And when that is what we are listening to, when that is what we fill our ears with then our speech will be impeded and we will be filled with false beliefs and false, misleading words. We will be filled with either despair because we know of nothing that will save us or arrogance because we don't believe we need saving. Like petulant children we so often presume as though God needs to hear us speak, as though we are master's of the Word which needs to submit itself to our reason and judgment. We often refuse to listen because we imagine that we no longer need to hear it. We think the language of the Small Catechism and the language of even Scripture itself is for children. Repent.

God must speak if we are to be saved and that is exactly what He does. He provided the preaching of the prophets and the apostles. He caused that preaching to be written down for us in Holy Scripture. He continues to provide for the preaching and teaching of His Word - so that we might hear Him and by hearing believe with our hearts. He gives parents so that children might daily hear the words of their heavenly Father and believe in Him. Then, having believed rightly we can confess rightly with our lips that the God of heaven and earth who has made us and against whom we have grievously sinned, has sent His beloved and only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to proclaim to us the love and mercy of God and set us free from eternal judgment.

God's speaking, not ours, not our declarations of love for God or our decisions, is the whole beginning and content of our faith. God reveals to us who He is and all that He has done and we say "Amen". Our whole life as Christians is a continuous cycle of hearing God speak and then speaking back to Him what He said, thereby glorifying His Name and proclaiming Him to be true. That is beauty of the Church's liturgy - it is almost entirely God's own Word, verbatim, on the mouths of God's people. The fountain and source of Christian prayer is what God has said and promised. This is why it is so good to pray the Psalter. It is filled with the promises and works of God as the basis for all hope and joy even in the midst of darkness and suffering. It gives you words to speak when you have none and puts words on your tongue you would never dare speak or believe except God spoke them first. The psalms are filled with perfect words of comfort and hope and peace.

Tomorrow/Today we have the joy of witnessing first hand the work of God to open ears and mouths by His Word. Today we rejoice to hear James make the good and RIGHT confess of faith as he has heard it and studied it. By God's great mercy, James' ears have been opened that he might believe and believing he now opens his mouth to confess God's Words and receive the precious gift of Holy Communion. Like each and every one of us, James was once a deaf mute but now he hears and believes and speaks the saving truth of God's Word to praise and glory of God His Savior. To God alone be all glory, honor, thanks, and praise for what He has done for James. May the Lord open the ears and mouths of so many more that together we may sing and speak the glory of His Name.

Saving truth must be and has been proclaimed to you. When the waters of Holy Baptism cascade over the head of the sinner, God speaks, absolving and adopting. That same speaking continues to echo forth as the called servants of Christ speak the absolving Word of Jesus' death and resurrection. And at the command of Christ, by the power of His creative Word, He joins Himself to the bread and wine of Holy Communion. With joy do we hear the voice of Christ giving us His very Body and Blood. On the strength of His promises do we confidently believe and confess that in the Sacrament of the Altar we receive forgiveness, life, and salvation. Ephphathah! May God continually grant to you His Word so that your ears may always hear, your hearts always believe, and your tongue always confess His saving Name.

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.