

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

22 August, Anno Domini 2021

St. Mark 7:31-37

Pr. Kurt Ulmer

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

This is really a great text about hearing and speaking that our Lord has laid in front of us today. In just a few weeks we will kick off a new year of Sunday School and catechesis for our congregation. Throughout this coming year, please keep teachers and students in your prayers, that the Lord would bless their work and that the Holy Spirit would create in all of us the desire to gather together and strengthen one another through our study of the Scriptures in the Divine Service and Bible classes and our daily conversations.

Two of the most important parts of education are hearing and speaking. If you want to learn about something that is new or difficult, you have to set aside your ego, read, study, wrestle with, digest, and discuss difficult things. You need to be willing to give an ear to others who have made study in that particular field. Students' ears have to be open as their teachers speak about shapes and colors, sentence diagrams, the quadratic formula, and molecular structures. If they don't pay attention, if they don't listen carefully, then they won't be able to understand things for themselves or explain them correctly to others. What happens if the arrogant star quarterback decides he knows it all and doesn't listen to his coach? What happens if the medical student isn't paying attention when her teacher explains how to properly set a broken bone or cut to remove a tumor from the base of the brain?

Only after correct hearing and listening can we then begin to speak correctly. Which of us hasn't been annoyed when someone starts speaking about things he clearly knows nothing about? And, the truth is, we've all done it. We've all voiced our opinions on things we've never really given any thought to or studied. But we want people to think we are smart. How many times have you given your opinion on a court case as though you were there at the crime scene, when the truth is you just read about it for the first time in the newspaper that morning? We're more interested in hype than truth. That reality is what drives the news cycle and just about everything on social media. We're a lot quicker to speak than

to listen. And often even if we do listen, we are so clouded by our own biases, contexts, and sin that we can't listen objectively to the facts and the truth. Listening isn't about us. Speaking, on the other hand, puts us on center stage. The truth is whatever we want it to be and rather than listening and learning, we just speak more loudly so that the truth cannot be heard.

But failing to hear the truth doesn't just create problems, it can be deadly. The electrician can electrocute himself or others. The doctor could make the wrong diagnosis and give the wrong medication. The architect could call for too little steel to support a structure. And we would all agree those are bad things that could have been avoided if those people had been listening.

The same is true when it comes to speaking about God, but the consequences are even more serious. In our sinfulness, we think we know it all when it comes to God and Christianity. We spend little or no time studying the Bible but we believe that we are masters of all it contains. The Bible and catechism get laid on the shelf, rarely if ever to be opened again. But what happens if we speak false things about God because we failed to listen to His Word? What happens if we are confronted with sweet sounding lies but we don't know it because we haven't bothered to learn the truth? We want to think nothing. We want to think that we can say and believe whatever we want about God and He's okay with that. But what happens if we try to comfort someone by agreeing with them that their loved one is in heaven because he was a really nice person? What happens if we tell someone that it really doesn't matter whether or not Jesus rose from the dead? What happens if we tell someone that being a Christian is all about being a good person and following Jesus' example? Bad things happen. Those poor people who hear us will put their faith in the wrong things rather than in Christ. They won't see any need for Jesus. And those who trust in themselves for their salvation will perish eternally. Speaking false things about God can have disastrous consequences both for the one who hears them and the one who speaks them.

If only there was a way we could make sure that when we open our mouths to say something about the Lord, we could be sure that we are speaking the truth, and clearly pointing people to Jesus. Notice what happens in the Gospel as soon as Jesus sticks His fingers in the man's ears, puts His spit on the man's tongue, and speaks the words "Be opened!" The man speaks. But he doesn't just speak – he

speaks correctly, rightly. In the Greek, he spoke “orthos”. There is a word used in the church that comes from orthos – orthodox. An orthodox statement is one that is true according to God’s Word. An orthodox church is one that confesses the one, true, Christian faith which is given through the inerrant and infallible, divinely-inspired Holy Scriptures. Jesus opened the man’s ears so that He could hear Jesus and once he heard Jesus, once he listened carefully to what Jesus said, the man spoke the right way, the orthodox way, about Jesus.

But he had to hear and listen first. Jesus had to open the man’s ears so that instead of just saying and believing about God whatever he felt like, the man heard Jesus tell the truth about God, sin, salvation, and eternal life. By hearing Jesus, the man knew the truth about God and about himself. By listening to Jesus, the man learned that he was a sinner and that Jesus was the One who had come to save him, not just from His disease, but from eternal death. And having heard that Gospel, and been brought to faith, the man could share that true, orthodox joyous news with everyone around him.

As St. Paul says, “We are not sufficient of ourselves.” Our sinful flesh is always trying to obscure and change and twist our understanding of God. We need to pray against ourselves every time we study God’s Word, that the Holy Spirit would keep driving away all the false things we want to believe about God and learn the truth about who God really is, what He has done for us, and what His will for us is. That’s exactly what we are celebrating today. We are celebrating the Word, the truth that Jesus has spoken to us in the Scripture. That Word that He speaks is the way that He creates and strengthens faith in us, it is the way that He illuminates all that is false and harmful to us. As Paul writes in the book of Romans “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” The Word creates faith in the Word. The Word of God removes the obstruction of our sinful pride and arrogance and allows us to hear the clear, comforting, redeeming voice of our Lord speak the words that we desperately need to hear “I forgive you all your sins. I have died for you. In me you have eternal life. I am your Lord.” Bible Class, Sunday School, youth and adult catechesis - these are all about doing together as a congregation what we ought to be doing as families all week - gathering together to hear and study that Word of God that creates and sustains our faith. Bible Class and Sunday School are about way more than facts. As we study God’s Word, that Word works on us to draw us to cling more and more to Christ and resist temptation. It is about digging into the divine Word and asking

God to further enlighten us, strengthen us, and arm us against every satanic effort to lead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Then we can go out into the world, into the various vocations that God has placed us in and speak rightly, speak orthodoxly about Jesus so that they too can hear the Word, the Word that can call them to faith and bring hope and life where there was once only hopelessness, despair, and death.

Sadly, it seems to be a growing trend for people to skip Bible Class and Sunday School. This is a sad and dangerous state of affairs among Christ's people, and especially all the more as the day of Christ's return draws near and, as our Lord in all seriousness warned us, it is growing more and more difficult to believe. The blazing fire of the world's hatred of God grows more and more intense and those who hate the truth carry out Satan's work of silencing the Word. How foolish of us to help them do their work. In response, we should be redoubling our efforts and the time we spend in the Word. Think of our poor brothers and sisters in Christ in Afghanistan who have just seen the dark cloud of Islamic purists sweep back through the country. People are being executed for confessing the Christian faith or having Christian material in their homes or on their phones. Think of how eager people were (and many still are) to stop people from going to church to receive the eternal life which Christ alone can give in the midst of the death of this world.

I urge you in Christ, as the one appointed by Christ with the overseeing of your souls, stay after church for the wonderful conversation, the fellowship, and the study that we enjoy during Bible Class and Sunday School. There is nothing but blessing and strengthening for all who continue this study. Even if the topic isn't always your favorite (and no topic is everyone's favorite), stay. You will always be able to learn something and share wisdom with your Christian family if you will be an engaged participant. With very rare exception is there anything that you actually need to rush off to that is more important or more beneficial to you or your children. What better way to spend time together as a family than gathered around the Word of your heavenly Father, learning and studying and growing in the faith?

Grown ups in the room, consider carefully the lessons you are teaching your children when you don't attend or pay attention to Bible Class. We have a divinely appointed responsibility to them not only to feed them the Word but also

to help solidify their fellowship with other Christians. Christ has entrusted them to your keeping to raise in the faith, to teach them to sit with Mary at Jesus' feet and give their attention to the one thing that is needful. We don't want to keep them from forging the very important friendships of faith that develop during times of study.

I encourage all of us to understand the Divine Service and the Bible Study hour as our collective time of training for the very real battles and trials that face each of us every day. Those who don't prepare will fall. The devil is the master of a thousand arts but none of His arts can stand against the Word of God. We ought not rob ourselves or our children of the opportunity to be fed and nourished and strengthened by that Word. We ought to make sure the full armor of God is fitted tightly and immovably in our hearts and minds so that we are not blown about by every wind of false doctrine that blows around us. None of us is as strong as we think we are. We all need constant strengthening by the Word of Christ. Bible Class and Sunday School are one of the very important tools that we have to teach and learn the very language of the faith so that we too can speak orthodoxly of Christ.

And, in that same vein, don't hesitate to take the opportunity to teach Sunday School or help in some way the continual learning life of our parish. The very fact that our congregation has been blessed with all of these young Christians, lays a holy obligation on all of us to participate in their continued nurture and instruction in the Christian faith. None of us are exempt. We can all help in some way. Take a turn teaching or being an aid in the classroom or watching the littlest ones in the nursery. If we all help, then all have an opportunity to not only be teachers, but also hearers. Let us all put our hands to this very God-pleasing task in thankfulness for blessing our congregation with these little ones. Let us in word and deed teach them that there is nothing more important in life than our life in Christ and hearing His Word. Blessed is the congregation that takes seriously and rejoices in the opportunity to study God's holy and life-giving Word together.

You were given ears to hear when the Word of God was spoken to you at your Baptism. The Word that the rest of the world only hears as foolishness, you now hear as the voice of the living God, breathing forgiveness and life into you. May the Holy Spirit guard and keep you so that your ears always remain open and your

desire to hear His Word at home and with your brothers and sisters in Christ is never quenched.

In the Name of +Jesus.

(We stand.)

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.