

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter, April 22, 2012
Lessons: Psalm 40:1-11 and Mark 7:31-37

AN OPEN EAR

Deafness can be very isolating, and people losing their hearing – becoming as we say, hard of hearing – may feel themselves slipping into isolation from their social groups, friends, and family. In his final years, my father went from hard of hearing to almost deaf, and his complaint (which he kept mostly to himself) was that not being able to hear what people were saying made him feel stupid because he could no longer follow a conversation and was always afraid of responding inappropriately. Because his problem was nerve damage, his hearing aids only magnified the noise without clarifying the sounds. As his hearing waned, my dad withdrew from social interaction and even private conversation. During his final stay in the hospital, I had to write everything I wanted to say to him.

It's hard to stay in the human conversation if you can't quite get what people are saying. A missed or misunderstood word here and there can create confusion of meaning, and people who can no longer hear well may contribute inappropriately or ask a question that has just been answered. Seeing other people's impatience on their faces triggers the shame affect, causing the one who is hard of hearing to withdraw and possibly to get angry which is, I suspect, the reason people with noticeable hearing loss are frequently perceived as cranky.

I did not find highly accurate information on how many people are born deaf, but it appears to be one in every thousand to two thousand babies. Some deafness at birth is congenital, and some seems caused by prenatal experience, as when the mother takes drugs or drinks heavily. By far, most deafness comes with aging. Because his deafness is accompanied by speech problems, I might guess the man brought to Jesus has been deaf all his life, but the guess cannot be verified and doesn't matter. What I hope we perceive is the social and relational isolation experienced by people who lose or never had a sufficient sense of hearing. God created human life to be relational, and while we may need private time for the life of the mind or the inward journey, we human beings live as persons most fully when we are sharing life, relating to others, working together, and reaching out to give and receive friendship, love, and service.

The deaf man brought to Jesus has friends or family who care about him, and they communicate his need to Jesus. He cannot speak for himself or understand much of what is

said around him. Add to such isolation the likelihood that he is illiterate, and even if this particular man can read, the written word has not yet become a significant means for daily communication. It will be centuries before Gutenberg invents the printing press and more centuries before email, texting, and social networking.

Once we understand that salvation means the restoration of people to relationship with God, to joy and interactive living in family and community, and to the kind of humanity and personhood for which God created us, we realize that Jesus' healing this man is an act of salvation. Jesus does not just promise the man a place in heaven someday and dismiss him; he calls for the man's ears to be opened and his tongue to be set loose. "Be opened" is a very salvific command that even reminds us of Jesus' resurrection with the stone rolled away to open the tomb. "Be opened" commands salvation which means, at root, being released from a tight, confining place out into a wide, open space where there is freedom to move, grow, and live. Last Sunday, we sang, "Open my eyes, that I may see," my ears that I may hear, my mouth that I may tell of God's grace, and my heart that I may care to give of myself in service. Is Jesus' life-giving command to us not indeed, "Be opened!"?

Sin is not just wrongdoing any more than sickness is a cough or a fever. Those are symptoms which, like wrongdoing, can become seriously harmful but are not in themselves the disease. Sin is isolation of the self from God and other people, estrangement from love which manifests itself in a lack of empathy and compassion. That's why strict religious practice and strict moral practice do not and cannot cure sin. As a colleague reminded me recently in a conversation about the ways and means of ministry, taking the religious or moral high ground for oneself is not salvific because it does not lead to humble gratitude or empathy with the sinful or compassion for the lost and wounded. Jesus' most severe critics loved to take the religious and moral high ground so they could stand head and shoulders above others they called sinners. That's why they came to hate Jesus – because he would not take the high ground for himself but stayed down in the dust with the people, caring for them, identifying himself with them, and sharing God's love for them and their need for healing and forgiveness. We look quite silly up on the high ground when Jesus stands down below us with the people above whose level we think we have risen.

Christ's church is not called to take the religious and moral high ground but, rather, to be opened to the people who need God's grace – God's unmerited love, undeserved forgiveness, and often misunderstood compassion. When a church takes the high ground to raise itself above the people and get away from them, that church leaves Jesus behind.

Jesus suffered and died in isolation for all the people who live in isolation with its shame, resentment, and bitterness. Some withdraw from other people. Some blame themselves and beat up on themselves every chance they get. Some avoid life with all its

pain by escaping into partying, heavy drinking, drugs, video games, excessive television, and even excessive religion or religiosity – whatever it takes to relieve their minds for a while without really changing their lives. Some get high on cocaine, others on “Jesus,” but when they come down, the estrangement is still there and their problems remain unsolved.

Easter means far more than life after death, heaven when we die. It means life for us out of deadness – up from the grave of isolation, loneliness, and hostility. “Be opened!” That, I believe, is Jesus’ command to us and every part of our lives..

Most of us are not deaf, or are we? We hear sounds, words, and musical notes, but do we hear each other or even ourselves? Far more of us have listening disabilities than are hard of hearing. A mind closed against people by prejudices does not hear them no matter what they say because prejudice distorts everything it sees or hears. I’m not kidding. Prejudice can literally distort what we see and hear. Decades ago, a Columbia University experiment demonstrated the distortion. Two young men, one black and one white (both actually students) staged a fight in a subway car. One young man pulled a knife, then both fled. Every witness told the police the young black man had pulled the knife. They were not lying but actually believed they were giving valid testimony. It’s just that they got it wrong. What they saw was not what happened. The knife was drawn by the white student. So, how did the knife change hands? The mind closed against reality by prejudice sees what it believes must be true, what it expects to see in the world. Our prejudices, whatever they may be, inflict upon us also our greatest hearing disabilities. Jesus’ call, “Be opened!” commands salvation for our minds, not just our eyes and ears.

Has anyone ever tried to encourage you when you’ve been down on yourself, as most of us have been at times? You may actually hear every positive thing the person says about you as cause for more guilt, more shame, and more self-scorn. An expression of thanks gets heard as a criticism. Friendship may be misunderstood as pity, and positive suggestions may be heard as judgments. To his church, Jesus has given the difficult task of convincing this world and its people that they are loved by God and that God desires relationship with them which leads to healed relationships within the human community. As the First Letter of John puts it, “We love because God first loved us.” Years ago I said in a confirmation sermon that what our children need most to learn from the church is to be loved by God and to know themselves as loved by God so they may respond appropriately in the way they see themselves and the way they see and hear other people (who are also loved by God). “Be opened!” Amen.