

“Hearing and Speaking”

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Among the many gifts God has given us to use and enjoy, perhaps none are more important than the gift of our senses. The five basic senses we have are ways in which God has enabled us to interact with and be aware of the world in which we live.

I still remember (in first grade) how our teacher spent one week with each of the senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. We spent time learning not only what each sense enabled us to do, but also how each of the five worked together to give us a complete picture of the world in which we live.

One of the men in our congregation (in those same growing-up years), an old Norwegian fellow named Mr. Overgaard, he use to talk to us kids about the five brains God gave us. His kids would tell him, “Dad, it’s the five senses, not the five brains.” He’d keep on talking about our five brains. It didn’t matter.

Nonetheless, the fact is that our senses truly are gifts from God. They enable us (and allow) us to know and understand and interact, not only with the world around us, but with each other.

In the New Testament, if you go through Jesus’ miracles, many of them involved a healing of one (or more) of the senses. In today’s story, it was a man who was unable to hear. He was deaf. Along with that, which often is the case, this man was also unable to speak. He was mute.

When I was growing up, there was a woman who lived near us who had the same challenges. She was unable to hear and, as a result, her speech was only in unintelligible sounds. She never heard words being expressed, so she had a hard time expressing them herself. I remember being afraid of her when I first saw her. As the years went on, her presence in my life left a good (and lasting) impression.

It was in the region (south and east) of the Sea of Galilee, known as the Decapolis (the ten cities), where the miracle in today’s story took place. It says, “Some people brought to (Jesus) a man who was deaf and who could hardly talk, and they begged him to heal this man.” (And he did.) He took him aside (it says), away from the crowd, and put his fingers into the man’s ears. He spit and touched the man’s tongue. Then he looked up into the heavens and said (in Aramaic) “Ephphatha”, which means “Be opened.” At once, (it says) “the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak.”

“Hearing and Speaking.” There are a number of lessons in today’s story worth mentioning, the most obvious being the fact that Jesus has the power to heal. You go through the gospels and you’ll find quite the list. He healed those who were paralyzed. He gave sight to the blind. He enabled the lame to walk. He cast out demons, healed the sick. He even (on a couple of occasions) raised the dead.

Jesus was a miracle worker. We know that. He still is. Every week we pray. Every week God hears our prayers. Now, does he heal (every time) as we would wish? No, he doesn’t. (I often wonder why.) At times, we simply need to trust. It’s not ours to decide.

But every time we pray (we speak), God hears those prayers. Every healing we receive comes as a gift. Every time we are healed (and made well), it’s only through the power and the grace of God.

In the Apostles’ Creed, each week (as we confess it) we say, “I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” Martin Luther says, (in his explanation) to the creed is that what we’re saying is that “(we) believe that God has created (us) and all that exists. He has given us (he says) and still preserves in us our bodies and souls with all their powers.”

In other words, what we’re confessing is that it’s only by the power and grace of God that we live each day. It’s only by the power and grace of God that we have the ability to hear and to speak (and everything else) as we do.

Now, it’s not the focus of today’s story (and I want to move on), but I often wonder if we thank God often enough for all we’ve been given? I’ll confess. I don’t thank God very often for my eyes. I only think about them when they need help. I don’t thank God very often for my ears. But I’m glad I have the ability to hear. Same with the other senses: touch and smell and taste, as well as the ability to walk and run and use my arms and legs as I do, and it keeps on going.

It's not the focus, but don't forget where it's focused. All we have comes as a gift. All we are is only by the grace and power of God. As Christians, we need to be reminded, if not challenged to never take what we've been given for granted. The world doesn't (often) make the connection. You and I should.

Now, that's the obvious lesson. Jesus has the power to heal, and he still does. Let's push it a bit deeper: hearing and speaking, the ability to open our ears and loosen our tongues. (You tell me.) Can the same need for healing be required spiritually as it can physically? Is it possible to (physically) have the ability to hear and to speak, but to (spiritually) have ears and tongues that are deaf and mute?

I'm not sure there's a better way to summarize the Christian faith and life than with those two senses. We hear the Word of God and then we respond in faith, speaking what we have heard. We hear what God has said to us, and then we do it and we live it and we share it with others.

That's the book of James, part of our second reading this morning. Don't tell me you have faith (James says) if all you've done is to hear it and know it's true. Let me hear it (he says) and see it, from your lips and in your life.

Just think about some of the things we find in the Bible. How often did Jesus say it after one of his teachings? "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." The implication was that we all have ears. The indictment was that not everyone with ears actually listens.

Paul says (in his letter to the Romans), "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." He goes on to say (in that same letter), "How are men to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear unless someone tells them?" (It's not going to happen.) "So faith comes from what is heard (he says) and what is heard comes by the preaching (and speaking) of Christ."

There's something about the hearing of God's Word that makes the difference. There's something about the speaking of God's Word (in response) that makes it real.

It's a matter of hearing it and saying it. The church speaks. That's our mission in the world. Someone else hears. That's how it happens. But it doesn't happen unless it happens. People never come to faith if they never have the chance to hear.

Just think about it. How come you and I are here this morning? (We've talked about this before.) Is it not because others have heard and spoken to us? Many others have spoken to us; that's why we're here. And we're here to listen to God's Word and then to speak it.

Now, I know this is basic. It's not hard to follow. I also know it's not always so easy to do. In fact, I believe it's one of the greatest spiritual diseases in our society today. (I really do.) There are not many (in our country) who have not heard the name of Jesus and who, in one form or another, have not heard his Word. And yet, how much of what our society has heard is influencing how it speaks and lives?

This can also get rather personal. (It's not bad when it does.) Ask yourself the same thing. Our world is filled with sounds, different noises and voices and words that fill up our days. Some are good. Others are not. What are you hearing? (That's what Jesus is asking.) And when you hear (what you hear), what impact does it have in your life?

It's possible, even in the Church, to be hearing all the right things, but never allowing those right things to sink in. I've known people (over the years) who've been in the church all their lives, time and again heard of how they are saved and forgiven and made right with God in Christ, but who still question whether they're loved (and going to make it into heaven) because of how they've lived. It's been heard, but it's never been heard.

I've known others who (many times) have heard the challenges of the Christian faith, the call to take up their crosses and follow Jesus, (live as his disciples), but who keep on doing what they've always been doing, and who've never sacrificed or been willing to give up anything as a result of what Christ has done for them. (It's the same thing.) They've heard, but their ears are (somehow) still shut.

It's like parents talking to their children: in one ear and out the other. It's like children talking to their parents. They hear the words, but they don't really listen to what their kids are telling them. Communication is an art. I've known many a married couple who are so used to hearing the voice of their spouse, that they never really hear what their spouse is saying.

Communication is key. It's essential in our relationships with others. So it is in our relationship with God. If Jesus is Lord, he's only Lord for us if we listen. If Jesus is the one we follow, he's only the one we follow, if we truly hear what he has to say.

Now, let's take it in the other direction for a few moments. Jesus did two things for this man. He enabled him to hear and then to speak. There's a lesson there for us, as well. Not only what we (as individuals) and Christians, as a church, are hearing; but also what are we saying to the world around us? God wants to open our ears to hear and our mouths to speak.

There's room for improvement here, too, isn't there. Without getting into specifics, in the way and the frequency with which we speak. We speak in many different ways – by our attitudes, our actions, our example. A life's picture is worth a thousand words. But in the story (we read today) it's vocal. What Jesus did for the man was to restore his ability to say words.

We listen and then we speak. We hear and then we tell what we've heard. That's our calling. The Christian faith is transmitted by the spoken word. For that to happen, somebody has to speak it. For that to happen, the ones who have heard what God has done need to be ready to tell.

That's not only common sense; it's also what Jesus said. It's our job to do it. Most of us, we love to talk. (That's a good thing.) But our speech needs to not only include the things we need to do to interact and to function and to carry out our daily tasks, but to give honor and glory to God. Everything we are (and have) is meant to give honor and glory to God, and our speech is one of the greatest opportunities and avenues for it to happen.

Now, you don't have to be a Jesus-freak for it to happen. We can err on the side of saying too much. (We've all seen how that plays out.) It's usually not good. But I'd rather err on the side of saying too much, than not enough or nothing at all.

What do you make of this verse? Are there spoken-word connotations in it? Listen to what Jesus says. (From Matthew's gospel), "Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven. (And) Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory."

I wonder. Have we heard that? Really heard that? Have we let the power (and implication) of what Jesus is telling us, go in one ear and out the other? And if not, if we really have heard it, have we let what we've heard shape how we live and speak?

Don't make it so hard. Let God's word make its way into your words. In simple ways; share it. Tell what he means to you. Share what he has done for you. Don't be afraid to let others know the difference he has made in your life.

In today's story, it changed the man's life. For the first time, he had the ability to hear and to speak. And he did. So did the others who were there. In fact, it says Jesus commanded them not to tell. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about what he had done.

Years ago, at the beginning of the protestant reformation, Martin Luther put together a baptismal service that required the pastor to take some of his own saliva and touch the ears and the lips of each child being baptized. At the same time, as part of the baptismal rite, the pastor was to say "Ephphatha", that is "Be opened". The same words Jesus spoke to the man who was deaf and unable to speak. It was meant (in that ceremony) to be a sign of what needs to happen (in all of us), and an indication that it can only happen by the power and grace of God.

Now, we don't do that here at St. Timothy's. I don't know any churches that still do. (I doubt if it would go over very well.) But the idea isn't bad. And (if not the ritual) and the actual practice, then at least what it represents.

From early on in life, from the time we are baptized until that day when Jesus calls us home, we need to find better ways to not be so limited in our hearing and so tongue-tied in our faith. God has given us our senses. He has blessed us with some tremendous gifts. Our hearing and our speaking are two that (spiritually) cannot remain closed and silent.

Let me close with this. Next week is our Kickoff Sunday. At the one service at 9:00, we'll be laying out a bit of our history, (where we've been), a snapshot of what's happening right now (where we are), and a faith-based understanding of where we believe God is leading us and what he is calling us to become.

My prayer (between now and then) is that God will open our ears to what he is saying, and that he will loosen our tongues to be more confident and committed (individually and together) in sharing our faith. I ask, between now and then, that you join me in that prayer.

To hear and to speak. To take in and to express. Both are essential in the Christian life. Both are foundational to our faith. Make sure you are using both. Listen. Really listen. And then speak. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that when we speak (to you), you listen, and when you listen, you respond (to us) in words of comfort and assurance. We thank you for the promise we have in Jesus and for the hope and the life that is ours in him. We pray that you would enable us, like Jesus did for that man long ago, to truly hear what you are saying and, once we've heard, to speak.

Take away whatever is keeping us from hearing and loosen whatever hinders our speech. Enable us and empower us to use our senses, all that we have and are, that our faith might not be found only in our minds and hearts, but in our deeds and words. In Jesus' name. Amen.