

Be Opened  
K Karpen, Sunday, September 10, 2006

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As our sermon song, I’d like to use the chorus in your bulletins, “Hearts Open Slowly.”

It goes like this:

Hearts open slowly so slowly, unfold like the flower, sing the songs of the dove.  
Hearts open surely, so surely; milk and honey will flow for the hungry to love.

“Be opened,” Jesus said to a man who cannot hear. “Ephphatha!” Be opened!”

And if that was all Jesus did, I suppose the man never would have started to hear.

“Ephphatha!” “Be Opened!”

I’m sure Jesus knew what he was doing, using a spoken word to heal a man who could not hear.

But for today I’d like to consider the possibility that Jesus is not just speaking this word to the deaf man, but to everyone.

He’s speaking this man to the man’s friends, whose compassion brings the man to Jesus in the first place.

He’s speaking this word to his disciples who have trouble being open to anything. He’s speaking this word to himself, following the curious incident with a syro-phoenician woman who asks for some help.

He know that he too has moments when he needs to be opened. And guess what? I believe he is speaking that same word to you. And to me.

Ephphatha!

It’s not easy. You try saying it! “Ephphatha!”

“Be opened!”

Speaking this word is not all he does, of course. Jesus tries a variety of things in his attempt to open the ears and free the tongue of this poor man.

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Mark gives us a pretty graphic description. Maybe you noticed. First, Jesus takes the man aside, in private, not something he always does. Then, Mark tells us Jesus puts his fingers into the man’s ears. Literally, it says he “thrusts his fingers into the man’s ears.” Then Jesus spits. You and I probably lack the respect for saliva as a conveyor of power and healing and life., that our ancient ancestors had. So maybe we can just skip over that part.

Then, Jesus touches the man’s tongue. Jesus looks up to heaven asking help from his God.

Next, Jesus sighs. He’s not sighing just because this is a difficult healing and it’s wearing him out. He is sighing to release his spirit. He’s sighing to share his breath, his spirit, with this man whose condition has left him so isolated from other people, so vulnerable.

He reminds me of St. Paul’s line in Romans, “The spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”

Jesus sighs; Only then, finally, does Jesus speak a word. One word, and Mark recalls it in Aramaic, the language Jesus and his followers speak rather than translating it into Greek.

Since the Aramaic is also presented in our English translation of the Bible, you might get the impression that this is some sort of magic word, like abracadabra or open sesame.

But that’s not the point. “Ephphatha” is a word in plain Aramaic, and its virtue is that it’s a word Jesus might actually have used.

You may remember enough Aramaic to recognize this verb form as either an Ithpee’el or an Ithpaa”al imperative.! But, it is spoken in the passive voice. You can tell by the English, “Be opened.”

Jesus doesn’t say to the man, “Open up!” Come on, open up!

Why? He knows the man can’t do it. He can’t open his own ears. He can’t open his mouth. He can’t open himself.

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Truth to tell, Jesus isn't really speaking to him at all in the passive voice. Jesus is speaking to his ears in a way. Jesus is speaking to his mouth in a way.

But the wonderful thing about the passive voice is that it does not state explicitly who is doing the action of the verb. We don't know who is acting or who is opening.

But Jesus knows. Jesus knows. The same one who always opens us, opens our ears and eyes, loosens our tongues, opens our minds and hearts. When Jesus says Ephphatha, he is using the divine passive.

He is saying, be opened by God. And in fact, god has already done it. Be opened! Be opened by God.

It's funny. Our ears are always open. But the other day, our daughter Jessie said to me, "Open your ears, papa," because, God forgive me, she was speaking to me and I wasn't listening to her.

Open your ears! How do you close them? Well, there are a lot of things we hear without hearing.

Some things we just get used to. The church next door has a big bell that they ring every morning at 7:30. It drives the neighbors crazy! They call me up to complain about it. I feel like hanging a sign outside that says, "Folks, it's not our bell."

But, do you know what? I never hear it. I sleep twelve feet away from it. After 20 years, I never hear it.

What else do I miss? What else have I gotten so used to hearing: I never pay attention.

When we in Mexico., I was awakened one morning by the explosion of skyrocketes at 5AM, Boom! Boom! Boom!, set off by one of the churches there to signal the start of some festival and some saint's day.

I walked into breakfast later and said to the woman we were staying with, "boy that was really something this morning!"

And she said, "...what?" What do you miss? What have you grown so used to, you don't even hear it. Be opened!!!

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Because our ears are always open, theoretically, our brains as our reticular system screen out sounds we can't deal with sounds we don't need to or don't want to hear.

I think there's something some sort of reticular system or our eyes that let's us get away with not seeing things that are plain as day, right in front of our eyes.

I know there is a reticular system for our mouths that keeps us from calling to our church, Be opened! Ephphatha! Do not be afraid.

Some system that keeps us from calling out to our poor government, Ephphatha! Be opened! Don't be so afraid! And don't count on us always being afraid.

Some system that keeps us from calling out to each other, "Be opened!" Ephphatha! Don't be afraid! I love you.

I think some system that keeps us from calling to ourselves, Ephphatha! Let the opener open me!

Because I know there is some system, of end device, that keeps our hearts shut out from things that might break them.

And it is true. So much around us has the capacity and ability to break our hearts. But only a broken heart is an open heart.

So I will say not say to you today to be open. I wouldn't have the nerve. There is too much that confuses and scares us and most of us are shut down pretty tight.

But I keep thinking of that one little line from the Psalms we read today, that line of surprise where the psalmist says, "I hear a voice I do not know."

So maybe. Mabybe. If you listen for it, with your heart closed as it needs to be. You may yet hear a voice you do not know, whispering in that divine passage, "Ephphatha;" sighing in that divine passage, "Ephphatha."