

“Ephphatha! Be Opened”
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San Dimas Community Church, UCC
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My mother always said that I was very slow to learn to talk. The reason she gave was that I had a sister three years older who said everything for me, so there was no need for me to talk. However, I soon discovered that my sister’s words were not always my words, and so I began speaking for myself. Human beings that follow usual patterns of development learn to speak because words and language equal power. Words give us the power to say what we want; words tell others who we are and what we need; words help us make our way in the world.

For the ancient Hebrews the spoken word was a powerful phenomenon to be reckoned with. The spoken word became its own independent reality. God spoke -- and the world was. Prophets spoke and history was altered. Once words were spoken, be it blessing or curse, something happened. When Isaac was deceived into giving the firstborn’s blessing to Jacob rather than Esau, who rightly deserved it, Isaac could not undo it even though he wanted to. The words had left his mouth and now had a power all their own to shape the future.

It was this kind of understanding of the importance and power of words that existed in the time of Jesus. To be deaf and unable to speak would be to be stripped of a very powerful force to direct one’s destiny. So the gospel text which tells of Jesus’ healing a deaf man with a speech impediment, is actually a story of empowerment. Jesus gives a powerless man who could not talk the power of speech. The actual translation for the word deaf implies that he had dull or severely impaired hearing. He heard a little and he spoke a little, but not well enough to express his needs or to make his way in the world. Rather than healing him in front of everyone, Jesus takes the man aside, touches his ears, spat and touched his tongue, and then looking up to heaven, he sighs (better translated as an agonizing groan of compassion), and says: “Ephphatha,” the Aramaic word for “Be Opened.” The power of Jesus’ spoken word empowered the man to hear and to speak. “Ephphatha! Be Opened.”

Last spring Joan Hellman told the Women’s Breakfast group a wonderful, modern day story of “Ephphatha! Be Opened.” Joan was 21 and well into her singing career. Yet she took time each week to go to the Veterans Hospital, taking her accompanist, and “Fliedermaus”, a tiny stuffed mouse that had been given her for a mascot; and there she would sing for the patients on the wards. She would enter the locked doors of the psychiatric unit, roll in the piano, and place the mouse on top so all could see and then sing. Always at the very back of the room stood a young man, also about 20, who had returned from the Korean war shell-shocked. For 2 years, he had not spoken one word. For several months the man seemed unaware of Joan’s presence, but then she noticed him watching both her and her tiny mouse. Weeks passed and then one day the man inched his way forward only for a moment and then retreated. The next week the same thing happened. The following week he came forward and petted the mouse. And then a week or two later, the man moved to the piano, picked up the mouse, and said the word: “what.” “What” was the first word he had spoken in over two years, and with that word the psychological barriers were broken. The man was “opened” --opened through music, human contact, and an unassuming little stuffed mouse. Joan says she never knew his name, but she found out that after that breakthrough, the man was treated, healed, and released. Ephphatha had happened!

If Jesus’ ministry was about empowering people to “Be Opened,” then our ministry as people who try to live faithful lives and our mission as the church is to proclaim “Ephphatha! Be Opened.” This means two things. One is that we must be empowered to open ourselves to the fullness of life and to respond to God’s call on us, and secondly, we must through our care and compassion empower others to also “be opened” so that they can live into fullness of life as well.

We don't really know what happened to the man Jesus healed. He isn't mentioned again. We do know he was accustomed to silence and the change and the challenge that his new found empowerment brought might have been frightening. Perhaps the silence, which he at least knew and understood could have been safer for this man than the radical change that hearing and speaking would bring. It sounds rather bizarre, but we've all know people who prefer to be sick emotionally, spiritually, physically rather than risk being healed. This is why Jesus in other healing stories sometimes asks the question "Do you want to be healed?" To be healed, to grow, to "be opened" requires courage to risk a new way of being that may carry with it new demands and challenges. When we allow ourselves to "be opened" like it or not change happens. What makes me sad are the instances when I talk with people who are stuck in life, dissatisfied with where they are, but are unable to allow themselves to be opened to be unstuck. Perhaps it is because they know intuitively that change and growth is often accompanied by pain and that as the cliché says "no pain, no gain." This fear of change often is expressed with comments like: "I can't afford counseling, I'm so busy I just don't have time to work on this problem right now." One of my favorite quotes of Elizabeth O'Conner is about this idea of fear or shame associated with therapy. She admits that sometimes political careers have been adversely affected because the candidate admitted going to therapy. Then she says, "If it were up to me, no one would be allowed to hold public office without two and preferably five years of therapy. We can no longer afford to run affairs of state from the unconscious." Each of us must answer the question of whether we are willing to risk God's call of "Ephphatha" -- be opened!

Maya Angelou related in an interview her experience of being raped at seven and a half years of age by a man who was well known to her family. The man was imprisoned and then released. On the night he was released, he was murdered. When Angelou heard this, she stopped speaking for five years because she thought that by speaking his name she had somehow caused his death. During those five years of silence, the child Maya Angelou read everything she could find--every book in the black school library, every book in the white school library. Angelou says, "When I decided to speak, I had a lot to say and a way to say it."

I don't know what catalyst brought Maya Angelou to speech again. I suspect it was a combination of things. But I can't help but think that part of the reason she spoke again was a deep rooted longing to be whole, to grow, to become her full self and that she had the courage and strength to risk whatever in order to make that happen. And her courage to risk became part of her people's courage to risk and to become.

So, Jesus' word "Ephphatha" calls each of us to be opened, to risk growth, to be empowered to be made well. But as I mentioned, there's a second dimension to "Ephphatha" and that is our ministry of empowering others. One way to do this is through our genuine care for each other and by listening--taking time to listen to one another's story--both their joys and their sorrows. We can proclaim "Be Opened" by being the kind of listeners that through our listening make it possible for others to be heard to speech--as Nelle Morton put it. Heard to one's own speech. This kind of listening does not promote our own agenda nor does it put our words in their mouths. People who have been silenced and who have found their voices have much to say to us. Jesus' healed as he listened completely, intimately, and as our text says with "groans of compassion" in ways that enabled the person to speak from within the depths of who they are; he heard them to speech.

The second way that we can carry out our ministry of empowering others to be opened is by being the voice of those who like the man in our story could not talk well. This man did not come to Jesus on his own, but the man's friends brought him to Jesus, and they begged Jesus to heal him. This man had advocates--people who spoke for him until he could speak for himself. In this room of mostly middle-class America there is a great deal of power; and with that power goes the responsibility to advocate for the powerless. I feel like I'm preaching to the choir, because you do this so well. Perhaps, I'm preaching to myself, because everyday I need to

remind myself that like the friends of this deaf man who begged on his behalf, I must become a beggar on behalf of those who have little or no voice. I must beg for children; I must beg for those who live with violence; I must beg for the differently abled and for gays and lesbians who have been ostracized even in the history of the church. I must beg for the sick, for those with AIDS. I must be a beggar for anyone who needs me to make their words heard until they can speak for themselves--until the time they are heard, cared for, loved, and accepted. I hope I can be the kind of friend that this man had, friends who brought him to Jesus and begged for him to be healed.

Today we often hear it said that “talk is cheap.” This is because so many empty words are spoken that contradict the reality of the person’s life who says them. Because words are sometimes empty and because of our scientific world-view, we no longer consider words to be that powerful. We don’t assume, as did the ancient Hebrews, that words once spoken will create an independent reality. But words really do have power, power to bring good into our world and power to do evil.

Lincoln Wirt brought me the hymn we will soon sing which was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer knew the power of words. He witnessed the power of Hitler’s words, words that resulted in great evil. But Bonhoeffer was himself a man of words. He was among the first to raise his voice against the persecution of Jews. He called on the church to denounce the apostate church under Hitler’s control. Bonhoeffer’s words were powerful because they reflected the integrity of his life. When Bonhoeffer was given an opportunity to find safety in America, he refused, saying “I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.” He returned to Germany and there gave his life. His life matched the words he spoke and his words are eternal.

Even today we hear Jesus’ healing proclamation: “Ephphatha! Be Opened.” It comes to each of us , calling us to be empowered people, to do all we can to empower others, and to live lives that are a faithful witness to the words we say. Then will our words and our lives be eternal.