

Welcome everyone, as we gather once again as a people to make our offering of worship to God. You may be visiting us for the first time because of the festival; if that's the case, we're glad you're here. Often times, when someone comes to a church for the first time, or the first time in a long time, there can be some hesitation. Don't worry, I can assure you: we are all just like you: sinners in need of God's mercy. We are trying to do God's will, make good choices, grow in our discipleship, and support each other in this effort. If that sounds like the kind of parish you could call home, we would be honored to have you walk with us on this path.

In today's gospel, we hear about Jesus healing a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. We probably take the gift of hearing and the gift of speech for granted, not thinking to thank God for these gifts. We are more likely to notice the gifts we *don't* have that other people do, and wonder why they are more blessed than we are. Perhaps that was the case with this man. Perhaps he wondered why he suffered this way when others didn't, why he had to carry this cross. Perhaps he wondered if God cared about him at all.

And then one day, here was Jesus. The man probably knew about Jesus, knew that he had been healing the sick. And here he was, taking him aside so it was just the two of them. Imagine what that was like: our Lord ministering to this man, one on

one, this man who had never heard a sound his entire life, and then suddenly, there's a first sound, piercing through the silence; it's a voice, and the first thing he hears in his entire life is the voice of Jesus: *ephphatha*, be opened.

What an amazing gift. What incredible love and compassion our Lord shows to just this one person. Now, this man who wondered why he didn't have this gift that so many others did, had his prayer answered. I wonder what he did with this amazing gift during the rest of his life.

That's a question that is relevant to all of us. What did he do with this gift that our Lord gave him, with his newfound ability to hear and to speak plainly? The gifts that our Lord gives are freely given to us, but they are given to us for a purpose. Our Lord gave the deaf man the ability to hear and to speak plainly, but imagine if the story continued. "And immediately the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly. And he began to curse his parents for every slight he had experienced his entire life, and blasphemed against God for creating him that way in the first place. And everyone soon regretted that he was able to speak plainly."

Can you imagine if that's how this passage ended? What a waste of a gift that would be. Taking a gift that the Lord had miraculously given you and using it to sin and harm others. That's almost unthinkable.

And yet we do that all the time. We have all been given gifts. But whenever we sin, whenever we say, “Lord, I know what you’re calling me to do right now, and I know you have given me all the gifts I need to carry it out, but you know what? I just don’t want to, so I’m not going to,” we are taking the gifts that our Lord has given us and using them to reject Him.

For example, He has given us the gift of our free will so that we can freely choose to love, freely choose to do good, and yet we freely choose not to love. God has given us our senses so that we can experience His creation and glorify Him through it, and yet we take them and use them to satisfy our own pleasures, apart from God’s intention. God has given us the gift of our bodies so that we can glorify Him in them, and yet we abuse them with unchastity, laziness, gluttony. He has given us each our own unique gifts, our own ways of cooperating with His will and bringing about His kingdom, and yet how often do we take pride in these gifts, using them so that others will glorify us instead of the one who gave them to us? When we use our gifts and our talents apart from God’s purposes, it is like when the healed man used his new voice to commit blasphemy.

Often times we don’t even realize we are doing it. We can be blind and deaf to our Lord’s will in our lives, of the gifts that He has given us and the purpose He has in mind for them. And if we are blind and deaf, we are in need of healing. So, here

is our Lord. Just like with the deaf man, here is our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, beckoning us to come away from the crowd, just you and him, one on one. That is his invitation. And if we remain with him, he will say to us, “Be opened, let your eyes be opened to the gifts I have given you, let your ears be opened to my will for you, let your voice be opened to proclaim my saving message to the world, and let your heart be opened to my boundless and all-consuming love for you.”

We don't know how this man's story ended. We hope that he was a good steward of his new gifts, that he used them for God's glory. How will our story end? What gifts has God given to us, and what will we do with them? Let us resolve to use our gifts to serve and glorify God.