

## Sermon for Trinity 12 – Mark 7:31-37

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

“And looking up to heaven, [Jesus] signed and said to [the deaf man], ‘Ephphatha,’ that is, ‘Be opened.’” As you may already know, the Gospels and letters of New Testament were originally written in the Greek language. Greek was the common language of most of the Middle East and Mediterranean at that time. However, there are a few places in the Gospels where Aramaic words have been preserved as Jesus originally uttered them. Aramaic, not to be confused with Arabic (spoken by modern Muslims), was the regional language spoken by Jews in the first century. Some Aramaic words that Jesus spoke etched themselves into minds of the apostles, and subsequently, into the Gospels when they were written.

These few Aramaic words were so expressive and full of substance that they were repeated untranslated when the account was retold in Greek, and they’re still preserved, even in our English translations. Some examples? How about the ending of almost every Christian prayer? The Aramaic word, “Amen,” which means “Yes, it shall be so!” Also the Aramaic word, “Abba,” which means “father.” And who could forget those Good Friday Aramaic words which were some of our Lord’s last words on this earth: “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” meaning, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” Needless to say, Aramaic words signal important events and teaching in the Gospels.

And Mark Chapter 7 is no exception: another Aramaic word comes to the fore. “Ephphatha!” means “Be opened!” “Ephphatha” is a word you probably know the meaning of better than the average Christian. Why? You’ve used more often, all because of our Ephphatha Room, which is primarily used for our Bible Study. It’s a place where God’s Word is opened to us and our hearts are opened as well. Yes, “Ephphatha” has a ring to it that is hard to express in Greek or English. What is it about this word, “Ephphatha”?

A crowd from the region of the Decapolis brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Jesus did what they often did back in those days when they tried to cure diseases. He touched the ailing part of the body and wet it with saliva. Maybe this was His way of communicating with the man and showing him that He wanted to help. After that, however, He didn’t use a spell or incantation, which had perhaps been done upon the deaf man by numerous witch doctors back at that time. Jesus used just one powerful word, a word with God’s all-vanquishing power in it.

As with so many of God’s words, Ephphatha is a word that has a much deeper meaning than our everyday words. First of all it means, “Be opened!” as in “Open up, you closed mouth!” and “Move, you lame tongue! Let the words you’re holding back come forth!” The underlying meaning, however, is: “Open yourself to the power of God.”

Ephphatha! King David understood this. In Psalm 32, David describes what happened when he closed himself off with his sin. “When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.” By hiding in his guilt, David actually became physically ill! But then, Ephphatha! “I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord,’ and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin ... Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.” David

opened his heart to God, and the merciful Lord forgave his sins through the mouth of Nathan the prophet.

Ephphatha! Jesus' first disciples understood this. Through the prophets they read that deaf ears would be made to hear at the time of salvation, when God was visiting His people. They understood that this was a sign and testimony. They would open themselves and receive something that never before was offered to anyone one on earth: forgiveness of sins through Jesus.

But this gift also applies to us: Ephphatha! Open yourself. It's hard, isn't it? It's a lot easier to stay closed off. It's a lot easier to play it safe. The lies, the theft, the gossip behind someone else's back, or whatever the sins, we take them to the grave. We don't want to let God, and most importantly, anyone see our sins. Hiding seems best for the moment, but who wants to live a lifetime with guilt? Nonetheless we take our hidden sins to the grave. That's the plan.

Yet God has a different plan: Ephphatha! Open your heart! The merciful Lord hears your confession and pronounces His forgiving absolution to you! May you, O heart of man, receive this gift from God. The kingdom of God is near. You are being visited today. Open your heart and receive.

So how does this happen? In Gospel, Jesus took the man aside privately, put his fingers in the man's ears, spit, and touched the man's tongue. Rest assured, we won't be doing that! If not spit, what? Luther tells us in his hymn about Jesus and John: "To Jordan came the Christ our Lord,/To do His Father's pleasure;/Baptized by John, the Father's Word was given us to treasure./ This heav'nly washing now shall be a cleansing from transgression/And by His Blood and agony/Release from death's oppression./A new life now awaits us." In the miracle of Baptism, Jesus' Blood freed us from sin, released us from death, and gave us a new life. In Baptism, God opens His heart to you.

In the Gospel, Jesus also spoke a powerful word: Ephphatha! And today He again speaks His powerful Ephphatha to you: Your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake!

Please pray with me:

I want to open my heart and my entire self for You like this, Lord Jesus. Only You can help me do that. Say Your powerful **Ephphatha** to my soul. Command my heart to open up even in its innermost hiding places to receive You and Your glory. Command my tongue to be untied so I can praise You and speak kind words to others, words that carry warmth and healing and blessings with them. Command my complete self to open up so I can receive for nothing and give for nothing, richly and lavishly, as You would want me to do.

And to this I add another powerful Aramaic word: "Amen!"

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠

*\*The majority of this sermon was based upon a meditation for the appointed Sunday written by Swedish Lutheran Bishop Bo Giertz (1905-1998) in the volume "To Live with Christ" (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008, translated by Richard Wood and Bror Erickson)*