

*Be Opened!*  
**Mark 7:31-37**  
John Breon

In this story a man moves from silence to speech and a crowd of people moves from pity to praise. How can we hear Jesus and know Jesus so we can praise him, so we can affirm confidently, “He does all things well!”? This story helps us hear and know better our amazing Savior.

The context in ch. 7 includes a dispute between Jesus and some of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and teachers of the law for displacing God’s word with their tradition. They were no longer open to what God was saying or to anything that didn’t fit their tradition. Traditionalism bound them and blocked their openness.

Then Jesus traveled to the region of Tyre—a city to the northwest. This was gentile territory. He was trying to get away from the crowds and spend some time alone with his disciples. But even there people knew who he was and sought his help. And he helped them.

That brings us to this passage at the end of the chapter. Jesus makes a wide loop, traveling north and then around to the southeast of the Sea of Galilee. He’s still in gentile territory. He seems to be taking a retreat from ministering among the Jews and disputing with them.

As Jesus and his disciples approached one of the towns of the Decapolis—the “Ten Cities” southeast of Galilee—some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk. The last time Jesus was in this region (ch. 5), the people begged him to leave after he delivered the demonized man of the tombs. Jesus had sent the man back to tell his people all that God had done for him. It’s possible that that man’s witness made way for Jesus’ reception this time.

The man that the crowd brought to Jesus was deaf and could hardly talk. That he could speak implies that he wasn’t born deaf. Maybe an accident or illness took his hearing and left him with impaired speech. Then, out of frustration or embarrassment, he may have drawn back within himself and given up trying to communicate.

The people felt sorry for this man and out of pity begged Jesus to place his hand on the man. Maybe they were just asking for a blessing or they might have thought healing could come in only a certain way.

Can we identify with this man? Do we withdraw into ourselves and close ourselves?

I went on three dates when I was in high school—one my sophomore year, one my junior year, and one my senior year. I wasn't a great date, either. I hardly talked at all to those girls. I could be outgoing and funny around a bunch of my friends, but by myself with a girl I was awkward and shy.

I eventually learned to talk to girls. But what makes us close up in all the ways we do? What deafens us? What keeps us from saying what needs to be said? Embarrassment? Hurt? Rejection? Fear? Dullness? Why do we shut our hearts, close our minds, and wrap ourselves up in our hurt?

Frederick Buechner has some helpful words for us here:

To do for yourself the best that you have it in you to do—to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst—is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from. (*The Sacred Journey* 46)

Rather than doing as the people expected, Jesus took the man away from the crowd. Jesus' *compassion* is key to his ministry. Jesus wouldn't reinforce the crowd's pity and he wouldn't embarrass the man. He didn't want this healing to be some kind of spectacle or show. Jesus wasn't interested in just attracting a bigger crowd with a display of healing power. Instead, he took him aside, treated him like a person, and dealt with him very personally.

Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears, then spit and touched the man's tongue. These gestures of healing seem odd, even disgusting, to us.

But some people believed spit had healing properties. And those were healing gestures used by Greek and Jewish healers. They communicated care and hope to the man. Talking to him wouldn't do any good—he was deaf! Jesus knew the man's needs and he let him know that he knew.

Jesus points out our needs. He lets us know that he knows where our needs are. Jesus is very specific. He singles us out and singles out our specific needs or sins or hurts.

I have a cartoon showing the pastor out of the pulpit, leaning over a pew with his finger on a man's nose. A person across the aisle says, "I've never seen Father Fosdick get this specific."

Jesus gets very specific. Feel Jesus' touch on your specific needs. The finger that reveals is also the finger that heals. Jesus doesn't just point an accusing finger at our shortcomings. He does something about them.

Jesus looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to the man, "Be opened!" Jesus is praying. Looking up to heaven is a sign that he's looking to the Father. He's doing what he sees the Father doing. He's saying the Father's words. The "deep sigh" could also be groaning. Jesus is pouring himself into this prayer. He feels deeply the man's need and his own healing power.

Jesus prayed and spoke the healing word. He sighed with compassion. God's love and power reached the man as Jesus said, "Be opened!" Jesus spoke not to the man's ears, but to the center of his being. When your heart begins to be opened, the rest of you follows. Wherever, whatever your need—Be opened to the gracious power of God.

Wherever we're hiding, Jesus finds us. However we try to shut ourselves in and life out, Jesus knows where we are and who we are. He touches us and speaks healing words: "Be opened!"

A pastor named Jim Forbes tells about preaching on this text at a conference on the Holy Spirit. Following his sermon, Katherine Kuhlman was leading a healing service. Katherine Kuhlman had a famous healing ministry for many years. As Forbes watched her, he wished that he had gifts like hers. After the service, a man and woman approached Forbes. The wife explained that her husband had been completely deaf in one ear. They had come to the service so that Katherine Kuhlman could pray for his healing.

He kept wishing Forbes would get done preaching so they could get on with the healing service. But as Forbes told this story from Mark's Gospel and said the words, "Be opened!" the man's ear popped and was healed. The couple told Forbes they felt the Lord wanted them to tell him that healing can come through the preached word as well as through prayers for healing (*The Holy Spirit and Preaching* 97-98).

The man Jesus ministered to was healed. He began hearing Jesus and the disciples talking, the townspeople gathering, the wind rustling the trees, a dog barking, children laughing. He began to speak clearly. I believe he was thanking Jesus and saying things he hadn't expressed for so long.

The crowd gathered again. Jesus told them not to tell anyone about this. And he was serious. Jesus wanted to be known as more than a healer and a wonder-worker. Jesus won't be squeezed into the mold of our expectations. He's always more than we imagine.

Jesus was proclaiming the good news of God's reign. Miracles, signs and wonders, are signs of God's kingdom. They demonstrate that the kingdom is present and they point beyond themselves toward its final fulfillment.

But the people kept talking because they were overwhelmed with amazement. Mark often portrays people's reaction to Jesus this way. But this crowd goes beyond the typical amazed response. They express their amazement with praise. "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

In that exclamation we hear an echo of Isaiah 35:5-6. That prophecy of God's great deliverance and of the Messiah's kingdom was beginning to be fulfilled in Jesus.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
Then will the lame leap like a deer,  
and the mute tongue shout for joy.

It's hard to ignore the parallels between this story of the deaf and mute man being healed and that of the healing of a blind man in a village

called Bethsaida that Mark recounts in 8:22-26. Some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. Jesus took him aside and spit on his eyes. The man's sight began to improve, but he still couldn't see clearly. So Jesus touched the man's eyes again. Then his eyes were *opened*, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

That account also recalls Isaiah 35 and it shows that the prophetic hope was being fulfilled in Jesus' miraculous healings. But in its context in Mark this story says more. Throughout Mark, blindness is a metaphor for spiritual dullness. Like the blind man after the first touch, the disciples had begun to see something of Jesus' nature and the character of his mission. But their perception was limited. They didn't have a full understanding of the character of Jesus and his ministry.

What was missing was an understanding of Jesus' sacrifice of himself. Jesus tells them about this repeatedly in the second half of the Gospel that this story introduces.

So to hear Jesus clearly and to see him for who he is, to see the kingdom of God advancing in his ministry, the disciples needed Jesus to give them spiritual perception. So do we. Faith is—among other things—our spiritual perception: spiritual eyes and ears. Faith is openness to God. This openness is something Jesus gives and enables. Not, "Open yourself up," but "Be opened!" Openness is not something we manage to achieve, it's a gift Jesus gives us. We are open to the power of God by the power of God.

When we receive Jesus' touch and hear his words—"Be opened!"—our hard hearts begin to come alive, our dullness gives way to vitality, our spiritual perception begins to clear.

To hear with my heart  
To see with my soul  
To be guided by a hand I cannot hold  
To trust in a way that I cannot see  
That's what faith must be

(Michael Card, on the album *Present Reality*)

When we have that faith, we begin to see and hear Jesus clearly. We come to know him and to experience God's reign in him. The salvation, deliverance, and healing that Isaiah foresaw and that Jesus fulfilled are available now. May we feel Jesus' touch on our specific needs. May we hear his words of healing. Then we'll be opened to hear his words of love and to shout his praises. We'll be filled with hope at the promise of the great and final healing in the resurrection when Jesus returns.

Right now, let Jesus take you aside—feel his touch, see him looking you in the eye. Hear with your heart his words, "Be opened!" As the miracle of openness happens, receive God's love and power. Please be willing to receive what God wants to give you, what God wants to do in you. Then begin to tell about it and express it. Be opened!