

Mark 7:31-37 16th Sunday after Pentecost September 8, 1991

31Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

You've all seen pictures marked "Before" and "After". In the "before" picture he is mostly bald, his clothes are rumpled, he's frowning. In the after picture he looks ten years younger because of the hairpiece on his head and the wide grin on his face.

Or there is a she in the picture. Before she is in black and white, her hair hangs down unwashed, her eyes are dull, her appearance haggard. But in the after she glows in living color. Her smile sparkles, her eyes have a twinkle - all because of that new hairstyle, the makeup properly applied.

This morning we will be painting our own before and after portraits.

In the before picture what do we see? A man who could not hear, who could not speak. We'll paint him alone. Silent. Separate.

How about you entering the picture? Step up, have a conversation with him. Tell him about yourself, see in his eyes there is no comprehension. Tell him a joke, there will be no laughter. Ask him a question, he can make no answer. Will you stay with him? Or will you flee like one flees the dead.

We know that some stayed in the picture long enough so that when Jesus came to town, they rushed this man to him. They begged Jesus to touch the man who was deaf and silent.

Jesus took the man aside in private. Jesus put his fingers into the deaf man's ears; then Jesus spit and touched the tongue of this man who could not speak. Looking up to heaven Jesus sighed and said to the man, "Ephphatha," Be opened. And immediately his ears were opened and his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Now let's take the after picture. We see a man smiling, speaking and hearing - surrounded by people. No longer does he live as one dead, but he laughs at your jokes - asks you where you grew up - answers when you ask him about his work. He's just like you.

Will he use his voice to curse the neighbor's dog that barks all night? Will his newly opened ears seek to hear of the dishonor of his neighbor's children? Will his tongue praise God, his ears hear God's word? Or will his tongue loose a tirade against the faults of his children? His life is full of possibility now, how will it be used?

Maybe he will wander the world, looking for people who are deaf and who cannot speak and he will sit beside them. Maybe he will find a way to communicate with them with signs.

Maybe he will tell people of Jesus, tell them that with Jesus all things are possible.

Maybe he will spend a lifetime thanking the friends who led him by the hand to Jesus, the friends who begged Jesus to help him.

Maybe he'll be all wrapped up in bitterness over all the years that were lost - how much of life he missed - how many opportunities passed him by.

Maybe he'll sit in the corner alone, so in the habit of being separate that he will not grasp hold of the new possibilities in his life.

Maybe he will just kind of blend in, doing what the neighbors do, nothing very different, nothing very special.

Finally, just like the before and after pictures, it really doesn't matter much to us what he did or did not do. The question for you is you.

Your tongue is loosed, your ears are opened. Hearing and speech in you are every bit as much a miracle of God, a gift of God as they were for that man. How will you use them?

Your Lord has left you free to use them in most any way. Jesus has promised that he will stick with you, that nothing in life or death nothing in things present or things to come will separate you from his love. Before you is all the world, all the people whom God has created and loves in Jesus Christ.

Nothing is to keep you from speaking a kind word, telling of your Lord, Jesus.

Nothing can stop you from standing beside those who stand alone. Maybe you will be the friend who will take them by the hand and bring them to Jesus.

You are free to risk your possessions, your safety, your security like Jesus did. Give yourself for others as Jesus did.

Today you are the one who has been healed by the love of your Lord Jesus Christ, healed in your spirit if not in your body. What will your "after" picture look like?

Full of love, full of peace, full of people, full of joy..... I hope so.