

ORDINARY SUNDAY XXIII “B”  
SEPTEMBER 8/9, 2018

The graphic detail of Jesus’ healing of the deaf/mute in today’s Gospel--inserting his finger into the man’s ears; using his own spittle and putting it on the man’s tongue; uttering the word ***Ephphata*** can repulse us to the point of not seeing beyond them to the deeper purpose St. Mark had in relating this miracle. At the time St. Mark included this story such actions would not have elicited the revulsion we have today to bacteria and possible transmission of disease from one person to another through saliva. Such actions would have been seen as the one utilizing them possessing healing, even magical powers. At the very least, they would have been seen as prophetic, even divine actions, which St. Mark clearly indicates they are.

The prophet Isaiah in the first reading provides the context out of which Jesus acted, but also how his action is to be interpreted. As the prophet looked forward to the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise of redemption, he proclaims that this time will be recognized through signs of healing. To be deaf, mute, blind, physically disabled, and any other form of physical, psychological, mental or emotional “dis-ease” is to be rendered to existing on the shoulders of the highway of life, to be “passed by”. In his healing of the deaf/mute Jesus proclaims that what Isaiah prophesized is now fulfilled in him. Using his own saliva, Jesus recalls the work of God bringing creation into being out of the primal waters that covered the earth, and humanity itself formed from the clay of the earth, (clay a combination of dirt and water) in the story from the book of Genesis. Jesus is about the work of re-creation.

Jesus’ word ***Ephphata*** “*be opened*” and his subsequent touching the man’s tongue with his own spittle is not only is about the deaf man’s physical disability being remedied. Jesus’ ***Ephphata*** is also addressed to the deaf man’s soul and the souls of his disciples, and us today, who fail to hear and see and speak of the presence of God and God’s kingdom in the world which we inhabit. When presented with the deaf/mute Jesus action of taking him off by himself is also instructive. Jesus makes time to be personally present to this suffering individual. He enters into the man’s struggle and pain—in doing so he brings hope and healing into his life. It is a sign of promise and hope for us, too. Jesus always is seeking us out desiring to heal all that separates us from him. Healed by Jesus the author of the letter of James in our second reading

today challenges us, like him, to seek out, to open space, to minister God's love in our lives for those who are different or made to feel different, unwanted, unvalued, unseen, unheard, a timely challenge living as we do in a culture obsessed with a person's worth tied to their wealth, fame, or authority.

In opening the deaf/mute's ears, tongue and soul, Jesus restores him to community. He is no longer an "outsider" but has now been made whole as a child of God. When we choose to purposely reach out to individuals or groups of people who are hurting, or experience prejudice and rejection Jesus' *Ephphata* presence and ministry are present among us.

Several years ago our parish began Stephen Ministry. Stephen Ministry is Jesus' *Ephphata* presence and ministry among us in a special way. Stephen Ministry equips people in our parish to provide one-to-one Christian care to each other in our parish and in our wider community who are experiencing difficulties in their lives. Grief, divorce, illness, loneliness, loss of a job and many other life challenges can render the one experiencing them deaf to the presence and love of God, render them isolated, cut off from former associations of various types. A Stephen Minister through their training, but especially through their loving confidential presence of listening, creates an atmosphere where Jesus' word of *Ephphata* can be experienced.

Due to various circumstances the number of Stephen Ministers here at St. Cecilia has diminished to the point where we are having difficulty filling the requests for a Stephen Minister we are receiving. All that is required to be a Stephen Minister is the desire to be a good listener and a commitment to be a compassionate fellow traveler along life's road. A representative from Stephen Ministry will be in the Narthex after Mass to visit with anyone who may want to learn more about this ministry which has already brought much healing to many in our midst, who have had their own *Ephphata* encounter with Jesus.

Lord, open our ears and mouths, and we shall declare your praise.

Fr Jim Secora