

### Mark 7:31-37

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

### MIRACLE EAR

Do you remember those Miracle Ear commercials? I wondered if they still sold that brand so I looked it up. And sure enough there are Miracle Ear outlets in our area. If you want a Miracle Ear they have a representative in Kissimmee for you to call.

But, here’s the interesting thing. Another hearing aid manufacturer purchased the Miracle Ear franchise several years ago. And they make an identical hearing aid that sells for much less. So, which hearing aid do you think people are more likely to purchase? You’ve got it. The Miracle Ear is still the top seller.

It’s the name. People want to believe. People want a miracle.

A popular evangelist had a healing ministry. And his favorite phrase was “expect a miracle.” He was very successful. People want to believe. People want to expect a miracle.

There is no question that miracles play a big role in the gospel story. This is especially true in the first half of Mark’s gospel. Jesus says what only God can say, and he backs it up by doing what only God can do.

Miracles were so commonplace that Jesus and his disciples didn’t even have time to eat or sleep.

It was crazy busy.  
And the crowds just kept growing.

## THE MEANING OF MIRACLES

But, the big question for us is what did those miracles mean? Should we expect a miracle today? Is the lack of power in our own lives due to a lack of faith?

Whenever I preach on the miracles of Jesus I am acutely aware that many in this very congregation are praying for their own miracle. Some may even be like the man in our lesson for today, unable to hear or speak clearly. Others may have a life threatening physical problem. Some may be struggling with depression.

I don't know what "thorn in the flesh" you may have, but this I do know. Almost everyone here needs a miracle of one kind or another.

And if you don't need a miracle, just wait. You will. I've found that even some who don't believe in miracles would like to have one!

At every prayer meeting someone has a story about a person who was miraculously healed. But, at every prayer meeting someone else has a story about a healing that was desperately needed, and didn't happen.

If the ministry of Jesus was so filled with miracles, why don't we see more miracles today?

Some say have enough faith. Those healed by Jesus do on occasion show faith. And in one instance Jesus even said, "Your faith has made you well."

But, faith and miracles do not always go together. Sometimes the miracles of Jesus produce the opposite of faith. Sometimes the miracles of Jesus produce fear. Sometimes the miracles of Jesus produce a kind of narrow selfishness.

You'll remember that Jesus was often frustrated with the crowds that came to see him for this very reason. The crowds focused only of the miracle and not on what the miracle meant.

For example, these past few weeks we have talked about the feeding of the 5,000 in John's gospel. They wanted to make Jesus king by force because he could do miracles. He gave the people food, and they wanted more.

But, Jesus refused to give them more. Why? Because the hope that feeding pointed to was more than just the promise of a full stomach. The feeding was a sign of something greater, heavenly bread that would fill their greatest longing. Jesus wanted to sate a hunger that even the blue plate special couldn't satisfy.

### TEMPORARY MIRACLES, ETERNAL SALVATION

You see, even the greatest miracles are only a temporary fix. If we are healed of terrible sickness, there will come a day when sickness will once again threaten our lives. Those who got their fill of bread and fish would soon be hungry again. Even those whom Jesus raised from the dead had to face their demise again at some point in the future.

Miracles are temporary. In order for miracles to create something other than amazement they need to have a meaning, a purpose. I think that's why in Mark's gospel Jesus is always telling the people who witnessed his miracles to tell "no one." The people didn't understand what the miracles meant.

Miracles without meaning do not produce faith. They just produce the desire for more miracles. There were other "miracle workers" in Jesus' day. There are "miracle workers" in our day. Most of them have their own infomercials that come on at 3AM!

But, there was only one Savior. And that's what the miracles in the Bible were really all about. They were signs that pointed in big neon letters to Jesus saying, "This is the one you've been waiting for."

Most commentators suggest that today's lesson takes its inspiration from the prophecy of Isaiah. When Isaiah wrote about the coming of God's kingdom he spoke about how the ears of the deaf would be unstopped and the tongue of the speechless would sing for joy. (Isaiah 35:5-6)

In Jesus this prophecy is fulfilled. When Jesus heals the deaf he is making a statement about who he is and the fact that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Jesus didn't want to be known as just another miracle worker. In fact Jesus cannot really be known at all until he has given his life on the cross for the sins of the world. The crucifixion and the resurrection make the meaning of the miracles clear.

The miracles are a sign of the kingdom that comes, that New Jerusalem where every tear is wiped away and there is no more suffering and pain.

And that's what miracles mean even today.

We can't expect miracles on demand. But, when they happen, when the prayer for healing is answered, it's a sign, a sign of a greater hope.

It's a sign of that Day when there will no longer be a need for medicine or hospitals or counselors. On that Day the Great Physician will bring healing not only to our crippled bodies but also to our crippled souls.

#### ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE

The big issues of life give us perspective. When we are struggling with a great illness things that used to bother us don't even seem important any more. We're once again in the middle of a presidential election.

Many of us are once again frustrated with the "nabobs of negativity" who come out every political season. Everyone seems to think that the sky will fall if his or her candidate is not elected. All of us have rediscovered where the mute button is located on our remote control.

But, in this time of political upheaval, I am reminded of the words of Paul Tsongas. He had been diagnosed with cancer and was wondering whether he should run for reelection to the U.S. Senate. As he was struggling with this decision a friend reportedly told him,

"Nobody on his deathbed ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time on my job.'"

Putting things in an eternal perspective changes us completely.

One of my teachers in seminary used to say, "If what you preach doesn't 'play' in nursing homes or the hospital it might be something, but it's not the

gospel.” The gospel is about more than a free lunch and good health. The gospel is about eternity.

And so the final cure for what ails us is not a miracle. The final cure for what ails us is not some fantastic new medical procedure or wonder drug.

The final cure is a sense of perspective, being able to hear what is really important above the din of the world’s selfish drumbeat.

Some of us may be pretty healthy from a physical standpoint, but we’re not in such good shape from a spiritual standpoint. We might not need the Miracle Ear to hear (at least not yet), but from a spiritual standpoint we are tone deaf to what is really important.

### HEARING WHAT IS IMPORTANT

A small school was going to play a football game at a big university. And the coach wanted to get his team ready for the noise.

So this is what he did. He took the mufflers off of all the lawn equipment that was used to maintain their football fields and had those machines run wide open as the team practiced.

The roar was so loud that it simulated the noise of the big game. The coach figured if the players could learn to concentrate under those circumstances, they could also filter out the sounds of the large crowd and concentrate on what was really important come game day.

Our task is similar. We need to attend to the signals that are really important. We need to listen to God’s Word amid the clamor of the world.

There’s an old story about two men who were walking down a noisy street in New York City. One stopped and asked the other to listen. Amid all the sounds of the traffic and people was the chirping of cricket. No one else heard it.

But, when the man purposely dropped a coin to the sidewalk dozens of heads turned.

What we hear and what we see depends upon what we are conditioned to see and hear. The prophet Jeremiah addressed a “foolish and senseless people ... who have ears but hear not.”

That describes us much of the time. We have a perception problem. We do not hear the things that are really important. Perhaps that’s why Jesus often said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

God’s ways truly are not our ways. We cannot know God unless God helps us. We do need a miracle. We need the miracle of faith. We need to have our ears opened so that we can hear the gospel.

Often the miracles of Jesus were a kind of judgment against religious leaders.

After healing the blind or the deaf Jesus would speak about those who were blind and deaf to God’s message.

The religious leaders would ask, “Jesus are you talking about us?” And Jesus would say (I think with a wry smile), “Well, if the shoe fits ...”

Now Jesus didn’t say this because he hated the religious leaders. He said this because he loved them. He wanted to jolt them out of their complacency and help them really hear the power of God’s saving message.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day used the language of faith, but what they said was informed more by the world than by God’s Word.

## LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF FAITH

Long ago people used to be warehoused in state mental institutions. One such man came from Greece and was a particularly sad case. They said he was a schizophrenic, hopelessly out of touch with reality.

The chaplain decided to ask the Greek Orthodox priest to visit the man. He thought that letting the man speak his native tongue might help him. The priest returned and asked, “Why in the world is this man here? He’s as sane as you or I.”

Bit by bit the story came out. The man had jumped ship long ago in a nearby port. Speaking no English he got into trouble and somehow ended up in a mental institution. While he was there he gradually learned English, but he learned it from schizophrenic patients.

Certain language misuse is common in these patients and so the poor guy managed to learn totally schizophrenic English.

To all the English speaking staff he sounded as far removed from reality as his fellow patients. But, when the priest talked with him in his native tongue he sounded perfectly normal. Eventually the man was release from the institution and given his freedom.

It seems to me that we have a problem similar to this unfortunate patient. We have learned the language of an unbalanced world. Every day we see distorted examples of what it means to be human. And if we speak that language long enough we too will become captive to the ways of the world.

Jesus wants us to remember our native tongue. He wants us to hear the language of faith and speak the soothing tones of God's grace.

We do this by listening to Jesus. In him we find an example of what it really means to be human. He opens our ears and allows us to speak.

This particular miracle gives us a good example of how Jesus heals.

## TOUCH

First, Jesus takes the man aside away from the crowd. And he puts his fingers in the man's ears and touches the man's tongue.

Large crowds often confuse those afflicted with a hearing problem. The verbal cues that we use to understand what is happening are not available to them. So, Jesus uses symbolic touch to tell the man what he is about to do.

Jesus often heals through the power of the personal touch. We see this pattern throughout the gospel. Jesus heals by touch, especially those who are deemed by society to be untouchable.

I believe we live in a world that is in desperate need of the touch. There is a touch that heals. And I suspect that Jesus might be calling us to touch others in his name.

## PRAYER

Second, Jesus prayed. The Scripture tells us that he “looked up to heaven.” How you respond to any situation depends upon where you look for answers. Jesus teaches us to look toward heaven.

A newspaper article told of a man who once found a five-dollar bill on the street. He resolved from that time forward to never lift his eyes while walking. The paper went on to say that over the years he accumulated among other things, 29,516 buttons, 54,172 pins, 12 cents, a bent back, and a miserly disposition.

The world wants us to look down, keeping our mind glued to the pursuit of earthly riches. Jesus wants us to look up in prayer. We do not have the power to heal or save. But, God does. When we look up we see the possibility of a greater salvation.

## COMPASSION

Third, Jesus healed with compassion. The Scripture tells us that when Jesus looked up to heaven and “sighed.” That sigh of compassion is at the heart of this miracle.

This is also an important theme in the Bible. The ministry of Jesus was a ministry of compassion.

For example, Jesus wept at the death of his friend, Lazarus. He had compassion on the crowd who were like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus was concerned not only for his friends and disciples but also for his enemies. Jesus was the embodiment of God’s love

In the compassion of Jesus we get a window into the love and grace of God. We see that God understands and sympathizes with the struggles of humanity. We are not alone. God Himself is with us.

## AN AUTHORITATIVE WORD



Finally we notice that Jesus healed with an authoritative word. He said, “Be opened.” And the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak plainly.

Only Jesus speaks with this kind of authority. If we want to be healed, if we want to truly hear, we need to hear the word of Jesus.

Ben Weir was a Presbyterian missionary who was captured by Shiite extremists in Lebanon. At first they taped his mouth shut. He said that this made him panic. He felt utterly helpless, unable to ask a question or even tell his captors if he could breathe.

The tape was eventually removed, but for months he was kept in isolation. Finally, he was placed with another captive, Father Lawrence Jenco, a Roman Catholic priest.

They talked eagerly. They shared important and personal concerns. They prayed and worshipped together. And they reminded each other of various Bible verses. Ben Weir said that his experience taught him the importance of the word, especially God’s Word.

Do we know the importance of God’s authoritative and healing Word? Do we have ears to hear? Or are we deaf to the importance of this moment?

The Spirit of God in Christ is still with us. Jesus still speaks the Word of hope and power to His people. He can open our ears this very day. God help us have ears to hear.

Amen.