

BE THE CHURCH - BE OPENED

Ordinary Time

Mark 7:31-37

A Sermon Preached by
Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
September 9, 2018

Scripture – Listen for the word of God.

The reading this morning is Mark 7:31-37, “Jesus Heals a Deaf Man”, as *retold* by liturgist Heather Hawkins Weinland.

The way my friend Mark tells the story [*see below*] always left me feeling slightly underwhelmed – as if you were rushing through the highlights, reading newspaper headlines along the way. And, and I don't fault him for that – he was doing his job. He was telling the story – proclaiming the good news – wasting no time getting down to business – wanting to tell us about this radical event – this event that is Jesus – that God is here and God is on our side. But my family and I, you know we always felt a bit cheated at how he told the story of my uncle. MY uncle. My fearless, fabulous, handsome, loving uncle. Who was deaf. And could barely communicate with anyone. He had a terrible impediment to his speech. No one could understand him. He was isolated and apart. Oh, but I *loved* him. He was my *uncle*. How could I not love him?

The day they arrived – I mean “they” being Jesus and the people that traveled with him – was this crazy hectic day. They had been traveling for so long. It was this bizarre trip. They returned from Tyre and then they went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee. And then they ended up in this region of Decapolis – where we lived – the district of ten towns. They were *avoiding* any city where Jesus was known. I mean, they were definitely avoiding the Pharisees. We had heard about him. We had heard that he was special... that *maybe* – just maybe – he could help. So when Jesus arrived we asked him to come with us. And, much to our surprise, he did. We brought him to my uncle. We *begged* Jesus to lay his hands on him. To bless him. Maybe something could help?

Instead of staying in this huge crowd that had gathered to hear him, Jesus took my uncle aside – in private. He took him off by himself. Well, I mean, there was no way I was letting that happen, so my mom and I followed. And of course most of my huge, big family followed after us.

And what happened next, I mean, what happened next is something they should write songs about. And poems about. And great novels about. And paint pictures of and build monuments to.

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Because Jesus, he gently put his fingers into my uncle's ears and some spit on my uncle's tongue – which sounds so weird and so gross but it wasn't. It wasn't at all. Jesus moved with such care and sensitivity and love – more than I had ever seen in my young life.

Then Jesus looked up to heaven as if in prayer – and Mark says Jesus sighed- but it wasn't. It wasn't a sigh. It was as if he were *sighing* and *groaning* so *mightily* that it might break your heart if you heard it. And then – in the stillness and silence that followed, Jesus said in his native language “Eph’phatha” – be opened. Open up!

And it happened – just like that – like an intake of breath – like a moment that shifts everything. My Uncle's hearing was clear. And his speech plain. His ears were opened and his tongue was finally released. Just like that!

[Snap of fingers and audible intake of breath and sigh.]

No one could really talk for a minute. We were all so astounded and shocked and amazed to hear the sound – the sound! – of my Uncle's voice. It brought tears to my eyes. To see him be freed of his brokenness and pain and silence.

Jesus immediately turned to us and ordered us to keep quiet and tell no one... But if you know anything about me and my great big family that didn't happen. The more he urged us to keep quiet about it, the more we talked it up. We were, we were beside ourselves with excitement! We were astounded beyond measure. Here, here was my Uncle. Healed. And here was Jesus. Jesus! He had done it all and done it so, so well.

Our songs, our poems, our novels, our paintings, our monuments all shouted the good news: the good news that

Jesus!

Jesus!

He..., he gives hearing to the deaf and speech to the speechless.

Listen:

Hearing to the deaf and speech to the speechless!

And *that's* my poem.

And *that's* my song.

And *that's* the Good News.

And *that's* the way we tell that story at my house.

– No hard feelings, Mark.¹

¹ Heather Hawkins Weinland, Seattle, WA 9/9/2018

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Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Sung Prayer:

Open my eyes Lord,
Help me to see your face.
Open my eyes, Lord,
Help me to see.²

It was the very first day of kindergarten and I was there in my new blue pants and my new polished black shoes in my new favorite red shirt, standing there at attention as my dad took my picture. And then the school bus, which in this case was a paneled Dodge station wagon, pulled up at the end of our driveway. And in that edge of utter terror and exhilaration, I ran down the driveway. Right before I got to the car I slipped and fell and went under the car. My mom said, "It was just like you disappeared." I crawled out from under the car.

You know that's not the only way to do transition and change, but that certainly seems to be my way. And in the last 24 years you have seen me in all of my exhilaration run and sometimes, yes, trip and fall and end up under the car. Where has he gone? And then he crawls out again. He says, "Wow! We could try that again."

You know, I don't know where you are this fall in that word "open" and where Jesus is knocking at the door of your heart to be *open* to the newness that Jesus wants to bless your life with and mine. I don't know where you are today but I wonder. What I do know is that to get to that place, we have to do that journey alone, right? But we have people around us – like, I love your story, Heather, your rendition of this Scripture – that what we know amongst everything we don't know about this man with an impediment to his speech and who was deaf is that there were people, there were people that brought him to Jesus for Jesus to work in him to open him to something new, who believed that there was something more for him to be and become. Who? Who is there with you and for you in the openings of your life today? How can we be church with and for each other in these opening days that we live in?

The night before I went to kindergarten my mom came in, as she always did, sat down on my bed to tuck me in. And I looked up at her and said, "You know, Mom, I don't think I really want to go school tomorrow." My mom said to me last week, she said I don't remember what I said. But I think I said something about to assure you that indeed, Peter, it was going to be all right, that we were going to be here, that we would survive without you here by our side during the day. And, indeed, that there was something out there for you to discover in the going to school.

Open my eyes Lord,
Help me to see your face.
Open my eyes, Lord,
Help me to see.

² "Open My Eyes" by Jesse Manibusan © 1970, 1988, 1998 spiritand-song.com, reprinted under Onelicense.net license #A706833. All rights reserved, used by permission.

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In Orthodox Christian churches traditionally there's a hole in the middle of the sanctuary, a hole, an opening to the sky above – a symbol, an expression, a truth that there *is* a Spirit that we need to let in and move among us. It is a Spirit that is always opening us – opening us – to the terror and exhilaration of the newness among us.

Often times in our churches, however, we like to have a ceiling. We're not so sure about letting in that Spirit that will move among us, and in us, and do things that we might like, not like, are unsure about. ... But that's the work of the Spirit. That's what God is doing in us and in our churches all the time. Are you open? Am I open? – to open the roofs of our lives and let the Spirit in?

I think it's why a baptism is one of the most meaningful, moving, tear-filled things that we do with the church – because we have a family that comes in all – in this case – in all of that preciousness of a little baby. And if I had a little baby in my life right now, I would not want to let go! And I think the most... one of the most profound things happens in the baptism. It's that that family has this child – hands that child – over to the Church, over to God – to bless that child, because that family can't do all these things alone. And if they did, they'd fail at them. But they need to hear again that the Creator – the Christ, the Companion, and the Holy Spirit – is working in and among their child in amazing ways. And they give that child in that way over to, yes, God, your ongoing creation. And they hand the gift of that child also, as well, over to *our* holding, as well, knowing they cannot do this work alone, that they're going to need *our* support and care and love. Thank you. Thank you for bringing Samuel today and reminding us that the work of the Spirit is here among us and it is good.

Open my ears Lord,
Help me to hear your voice.
Open my ears, Lord,
Help me to hear.³

It was September many years ago in my freshman year of college. I'd just given a little report in my religion class on the crucifixion and that point in the crucifixion where Jesus says "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"⁴ Everything in him – and everything in us – says, you know, we're not really so open. And then that last word of Jesus, that amazing word, that word that always is somewhere out ahead of us, before us, beyond us: "into your hands". "[Father,] into your hands I entrust my spirit."⁵... I give my life. Into your hands, into that unknown. There again is he, the man brought before Jesus, openly to what I do not know.

Well, I gave my little report in class and you know, it went okay.

And I was late to gym class and I ran down the hill to gym class. I made it through the door without slipping, got to gym class and the locker room's empty. And I'm sitting there on the bench and I'm changing into my sneakers. And at that time I have an overwhelming experience of love. I mean love like I've never, ever in my life – in my 18 years – ever experienced in that way – just love. Like I was Love.

³ Manibusan, Op cit.

⁴ Holy Bible, Matthew 27:46.

⁵ Holy Bible, Luke 23:46.

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I didn't know what to do with it. [*Uncomfortable chuckle.*] In my UCC church we didn't talk about such experiences.

I felt a call. I felt perhaps, perhaps I need to be a minister... Perhaps I'm called to be a minister.

I don't know about you, but if in your life you, along the way, have as we are "called" to do certain things, go certain places, I know the truth of it, because it is full of fear. Full of fear. That's why I know it's something big. But it is also full of exhilaration which gives me the courage to go there.

Well, on that pivot between fear and exhilaration, I didn't say a word to anybody. This was not part of my plans. It was *not* what I expected, wanted from going to college. I had my ideas of what I was gonna study and where I was gonna go and what I was gonna do with my life. And I *sat* on it for three long years. In both a kind of shame of "I can't believe I had that experience" to try to explain it away in all of the ways I could – psychologically, sociologically, *any way*, I could explain it away, take it away. But it kept coming back to me. Until one day – perhaps... and you know these places and the place when you kind of give up fighting – I wrote about it:

"I was changing my shoes in the locker room ... "

And our chaplain, who was a kind, good man, the teacher of our class... And I just wrote that story. He gave me back the paper. And all he wrote in the side of the column where I wrote my story was, "A gift." A gift! Wow! Was that opening, could these openings in our lives, too, be gifts? Are we going to go there and discover the gift that is there for us to receive.

Sung Prayer

Open my heart Lord,
Help me to love like you.
Open my heart, Lord,
Help me to love.⁶

In a time of opening in his life, St. John of the Cross writes a story, "I said to the man who stood at the gate, 'Give me a light that I may see my way into the darkness.' Are you waiting still for that light? Give me a light.

But the man at the gate said, "Put your hand out, instead, into the darkness for that is better and safer than a known way.

Sung prayer

I am open and I am willing
for to be hopeless would seem so strange.

It dishonors those who go before us
so lift me to the light of change.⁷

⁶ Manibusan, Op cit.

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UCUCC: PI

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from <https://universityucc.org/sermons> then to "More Podcasts" and SoundCloud as needed

"Jesus Heals a Deaf Man", as told in Mark:

Mark 7:31-37⁸

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

09/26/2018

⁷ "I Am Willing" ©2006 Holly Near, reprinted in bulletin under Onelicense.net license #A706833. All rights reserved, used by permission.

⁸ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .