

Ephphatha - Be Opened

A gospel reflection from Brian Wigger, Pastoral Associate

A few weeks ago, I saw a delivery driver coming to drop off a package here at church. Instead of coming to the office or the rectory where mail is usually taken, he was heading towards the main doors of the church. So, I went outside to grab his attention. After a few attempts of saying, “Sir! Sir! Sir!” and growing frustrated, I started walking towards him. When he turned around and saw the look on my face, he apologetically signaled that he was deaf. My heart sank. I was quick to judge. I was Humbled.

That moment made me consider how difficult it must be to be deaf, because nobody can immediately recognize your condition. You have to interact with a deaf person – hopefully in a kinder manner than I did – before you realize they cannot hear you.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus does more than heal a deaf man. He shows great compassion, something this man was often denied.

To be deaf in the first century was like a scarlet letter; people associated it with sin. You were deaf because you were a sinner. God was punishing you. Today we know that isn’t the case. But you can imagine how unfairly this man must’ve been treated by others his whole life.

While Jesus could’ve easily healed him from a distance, he pulled him aside, and touched the most wounded parts of his life, literally digging his finger into this man’s ear and spitting on his tongue.

Touching the source of this man’s pain, Jesus looks up to the heavens, groans, and cries out, in Arabic, “Ephphatha!” which means, Be opened.

This is one of only three scenes in the Gospels where Jesus is recorded speaking in his native tongue, Aramaic.

The second time comes when he’s standing next to parents who’ve just lost their daughter. Moved with grief, Jesus touches the dead girl and cries out, “Talitha kum!” “Little girl, I say to you, arise!” Like the deaf man, instantly, she’s healed

These two scenes – the pain of a deaf man and the death of a little girl – struck a chord in Jesus so deeply that his words were never translated.

When is the final time we hear Jesus speaking in his native tongue?

While hanging from the Cross. There, he takes on the pain of every human being – not just the pain of a deaf man or a young girl’s family. Carrying all of this weight, he cries out: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

When we look at what’s happened in the world this week alone– from the Middle East, to Russia and Ukraine at war, to the devastating heat to the political fighting in America, school shooting in Georgia, so many have cried out with similar words, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Our world is in dire need of healing.

Physically, homes, businesses, and entire communities must be rebuilt. Beneath the physical destruction, though, is the emotional pain of loss, something that everyone feels from time to time.

Yet like the man who was deaf, we can conceal what burdens us most.

Nobody walks around with a t-shirt, saying: Deaf. Cancer. Broken. Difficult Marriage. Addict. Frazzled. Doubting. Financially unstable. Insecure. Lonely. Depressed.

But if we allow Jesus to pull us aside, and dig his finger into our wounds, he will surely say, "Ephphatha!" Be opened!

How we wish that our healing were as immediate as it was for the man in the Gospel.

But, remember how his healing started: it was the community who brought him to Jesus. Without them, he'd be unaware that Jesus was passing by; without them, this man would still be isolated and deaf.

Time and time again, at St. Stephen Church this Gospel is lived out. You can see it in our genuine welcome and gratitude, and in our prayers, love, volunteerism and support for one another and with our guests who come to be with us for Mass.

May we continue to bring one another to Jesus – in prayer and through our actions – so that everyone can experience those gracious words:

"Ephphatha." Be opened: Be healed.