

## “Be Opened!”

Mark 7:24-37

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One of my more vivid images from childhood is being at the grandparent's farm and my grandmother looking into my ears and exclaiming, “There's enough dirt in there to plant potatoes!” She then attacked both ears with a soapy washcloth, twisting it all around, and then smiling the smile of a mighty conqueror. I don't know if I could hear any better after the attack, but I felt strangely loved and radically cared for.

The story of Jesus healing the deaf man called that memory up from my memory bank. I've always marveled at this account of Jesus unstopping the deaf man's ears such that he could hear again. He used a little spittle instead of a soapy wash cloth. It's quite a dramatic scene. Can you hear Jesus commanding the ears: “Be opened!?” It's one of a number of miracle healing stories Mark has recorded. What a joy to be able to hear again. I can picture this fellow dashing over to the nearest school to hear children talking and singing. Then I picture him running to the market to hear the buyers and sellers bickering over the price of a sack of grain. I see him hustling to the church picnic to catch up on all the news of the youth mission trips and the adult Bible circle and the next cooking class.

This guy is alive again! The community sees the transformation that has taken place, and they are awed by Jesus' authority to heal. In all humility, he tries to make them keep quiet about it, not to go proclaiming what they have witnessed. But they can't help themselves! They've witnessed a miracle, and they want to tell the world all about it. ‘Our neighbor was deaf, but now he can hear!’

Now Mark, like the other Gospel writers, tells his stories with meaning on more than one level. Mark, of course, is thrilled with the reality that a man can hear again. But he also knows that those with perfectly good hearing also need to be healed of another kind of deafness, a spiritual deafness. He knows other miracles are waited to spring forth. He knows there are members of his congregation who are listening to the Gospel, but not hearing it. So for Mark, it is to the whole congregation that Jesus raises his voice, commanding, “Be opened!” Be opened to the Spirit!

Be opened to a whole new definition of neighbor.

Be opened to the possibility God might be calling you to teach in the church school.

Be opened to singing in a choir.

Be opened to a dialogue with a Jewish man or a Muslim woman.

Be opened to becoming a literacy volunteer.

Be opened to the Sunday morning Café class for adults.

Be opened to taking piano lessons!

Be opened to having a meal with Randy LaRocca from time to time.

Be open to being more generous with your resources than you have ever been before in your life.

Last Thursday, nine of us gathered at Mama’s Place at 1015 Albany Avenue in Hartford’s north end. Each one of us had heard and responded to a little voice that was saying, “Be opened to something new!” And we did! We opened ourselves to oxtail and goat meat and black eyed peas. We opened ourselves to a Jamaican woman’s hospitality. We opened ourselves to a neighborhood whose history was unknown to us and whose future became our curiosity. We opened ourselves to each other! Most of the nine had never met before! Now we are bonded by peri peri pepper and pulled chicken and bottled soft drinks we had never tasted before!

In the film, *The Dead Poet's Society*, the English teacher played by Robin Williams takes his class of boarding school boys out into the hallowed hallway where the pictures of bygone classes hang with distinction. He urges the boys to come closer to the photos, to draw near. He tells them if they listen hard enough they'll hear these alums whispering words of encouragement. Some believing, some skeptical, the boys all move closer and listen with all their might for those voices of encouragement. Hold onto that image.

In Mark's healing story, the teacher is calling all of us from our seats in the pews out into the narthex where he urges us to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is whispering to us all: "Be opened!" Be opened to what God is doing in your life. Be opened to what God is doing all around you. Be opened for the way God can use you as an instrument of peace.

Sisters and brothers, on this homecoming Sunday, I won't play Grandmother Clemmer and look into your ears, but I will simply echo the wisdom of ages, saying, be opened!

In the greatest of hope, Amen!