

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 6, 2009
Rev. William L. Love

EPHPHATHA

Proverbs 2:1-8
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:31-37

Invariably, when I sit down to write the sermon, I listen to music. Most frequently, I listen to Handel's *Messiah*. Other times I listen to a requiem. Faure's *Requiem* is one of my favorites. Or I'll listen to Mozart or Bach.

When I wrote this sermon, I listened to Beethoven. All nine of Beethoven's symphonies. The Ninth Symphony ends with the *Ode to Joy*, the majesty of which never fails to move me, to which we have put the words of the hymn *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*.

Beethoven was deaf and never heard that music. Beethoven said: *It was impossible for me to say to people, "Speak louder, shout, I am deaf." What a humiliation when one stood beside me and heard a flute in the distance, and I heard nothing, and again someone heard the shepherd singing and again I heard nothing.... I would have put an end to my life—only art it was that withheld me. It seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon to produce.* [Shippen, *The Heritage of Music*, 126]

* * *

And they brought to Jesus one who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they besought Jesus to lay his hand upon the person.

* * *

I remember being asked brain teasers—the kind of question that you are not really supposed to answer but to puzzle over. The one I remembered this week is: If a tree falls in the woods and there is no one to hear, does it make any sound? (I have heard a variation of that question, told Joann last night, and she dared me to say it today. It is: If a man speaks in the forest and there's no woman to hear him, is he still wrong?)

* * *

And they brought to Jesus one who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they besought Jesus to lay his hand upon that person.

* * *

One of my friends from college days is a speech therapist, who worked mostly with people who had had strokes and had lost their ability to speak clearly and with children who had speech impediments, such as stuttering, but also worked at the North Carolina School for the Deaf.

One day, three students and a former student from the School for the Deaf came over. The former student still lived nearby—afraid to venture too far out into the hearing world, wanting to stay close to the security of the school where being deaf was not odd.

They and my friend (who knew sign language) spoke to each other. They could hear nothing, but they understood each other. They used what seemed like a foreign language to me. I could not hear them because my eyes were not able to understand their words. I could not speak to them because my hands were not able to speak.

They were suspicious of me and mistrustful because of the pain they had experienced in the hearing world. In that room, I was the one who was deaf. I was the one with a speech impediment.

* * *

We who hear hear too much, and so we hear selectively. And we are deaf to much that there is to hear. And not hearing, our speech is impaired about those things we do not hear—not so much because they are beyond the capacity of our ears but because they are beyond our willingness to hear, and we choose not to listen.

We too are deaf—to the sounds that meet the human ear and to the sounds that reach the human soul: the fears that we try to avoid facing; the guilt or shame, which does not allow us to accept ourselves unconditionally and to hide the unacceptable parts behind an acceptable veneer; the people we know with whom we are angry, who have become like strangers; the people we do not know and will not know because to know them would mean that we would have to extend ourselves and become open, and therefore vulnerable, to them.

* * *

And they brought to Jesus one who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they besought Jesus to lay his hand upon that person. And Jesus took the person aside from the multitude privately.

* * *

The deaf know enough of humiliation as Beethoven had, of being closed out of conversations, of never being entirely sure but what laughter meant being the butt of a joke they had not heard.

And Jesus—who felt a woman in a crowd touch the hem of his robe, who saw Zacchaeus hiding in a tree, who amid the shouts of a mob below him heard the cry of a dying thief—takes the person aside privately. There had been enough hurt in that life already.

* * *

Some years ago, I saw the National Theater for the Deaf perform Mark Medoff's play ***Children of a Lesser God***.

The principal characters are Sarah Norman and James Leeds. Sarah is deaf—not just hearing-impaired but born deaf, profoundly deaf. She has never heard.

Among those who have heard or who have some minimal hearing, speaking is difficult enough. Even then, because they do not hear or hear poorly and cannot reproduce the sound as hearing people do, their voices are likely to reveal some impediment, however slight, of speech.

Sarah has never heard. And so she does not speak.

James is a hearing teacher who teaches the deaf to read lips and to speak.

Sarah had come to the school at the age of 5 and, though she had been a bright student, had stayed on past graduation to work at the school doing janitorial work.

James wants to teach her to speak so that she can function better in the hearing world.

Their relationship is stormy because Sarah thinks that James had not made an effort to learn what her world of deafness is like and wants her to learn to speak so that he will not have to, that she must enter his world but he does not have to understand hers. And she is right.

She signs: *Deafness isn't the opposite of hearing. It's a silence full of sound...the sound of spring breaking up through the death of winter.*

Listen, for all my life I have been the creation of other people. The first thing I was ever able to understand was that everyone was supposed to hear but I couldn't and that was bad. Then they told me everyone was supposed to be smart but I was dumb. Then they said, Oh no, I wasn't permanently dumb, only temporarily, but to be smart I had to become an imitation of the people who had from birth everything a person has to have to be good: ears that hear, mouth that speaks, eyes that read,

*brain that understands. Well my brain understands a lot, and my eyes are my ears, and my hands are my voice, and my language, my speech, my ability to communicate is as great as yours. Greater maybe because I can communicate to you in one image an idea more complex than you can speak to each other in fifty words. For example, the sign "to connect", a simple sign—but it means so much more when it is moved between us like this. Now it means to be joined in a shared relationship, to be individual yet as one. A whole concept just like that. Well, I want to be joined to other people, but for all my life people have spoken for me. **She** says, **she** means, **she** wants. As if there were no **I**. As if there were no one in here who **could** understand. Until you let me be an individual, an **I**, just as you are, you will never truly be able to come inside my silence and know me. And until you do that, I will never let myself know you. Until that time...we cannot share a relationship.*

* * *

*They brought to Jesus one who was deaf and had a speech impediment and they besought Jesus to lay his hand upon that person. And taking the person aside from the multitude privately, Jesus put his fingers into the person's ears, and spat and touched the person's tongue, and looking up into heaven, Jesus sighed and said, **Ephphatha**, that is, **Be opened**. And the ears were opened, the tongue was released, and the person spoke plainly.*

* * *

The healing involved the ability to hear and differentiate among the many sounds which strike the ear—to differentiate among sounds and to be able to reproduce the sound. *His ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.*

Much of our deafness is that we do not listen to our own lives or the lives of those around us—and we make judgments without hearing (because hearing another requires a lot of work)—and we do not speak plainly. And our indistinct speech goes by such names as racism, nationalism, militarism, sexism—or when it is ourselves to whom we do not listen, the names include loneliness and any number of neuroses.

For the one they brought to Jesus, healing came with the opening of his ears to hear and his mouth to speak clearly. For Sarah and James, healing came as they faced the truths about each of them that they had denied or repressed.

For us, healing comes as Jesus' saying, *Ephphatha*, becomes a living reality in our lives.

* * *

The way the epistle of James says it is: *Be quick to hear, slow to speak.*

* * *

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest who, until his death, taught at Yale Divinity School, told about a meeting with a parish priest: *Not long ago, I met a parish priest. After describing his hectic daily schedule—religious services, classroom teaching, luncheon and dinner engagements, and organizational meetings—he said apologetically: "...[T]here are so many problems...." When I asked, "Whose problems?", he was silent for a few minutes, and then more or less reluctantly said, "I guess—my own."* [Nouwen, **The Wounded Healer**, 89-90]

He kept such a hectic schedule because he was afraid of what (or whom) he

EPHPHATHA — 4

would find if he stopped and listened to his own life.

And because we find it hard to listen to our own lives, we have a hard time really paying attention to others because our intentions take over.

And as soon as our intentions take over, the question no longer is, "Who is [the other person]?" but "What can I get from [the other person]?—and then we no longer listen to what [the other person] is saying but to what we can do with what [is being said]." [Mouwen, 90]

It may take an apparently caring form of "what can I do for the other person" but still the question is no longer "who is the other?" but "what can I do with what the other person is saying?"

Instead of paying attention to the other person—really hearing what is being said—we are concerned *with the fulfillment of our unrecognized need for sympathy, friendship, popularity, success, money, or a career....* [Nouwen, 90]

What may happen is either, since our need is unrecognized and unspoken, the other person will not meet it fully, leaving us disappointed, discouraged, even embittered, or that our need is met by our manipulating the other person, leaving the other person disappointed, discouraged, even embittered.

Most likely, we will feel an unnamed uneasiness that we cannot quite put our finger on.

Our healing begins to take place as we listen fully to ourselves, even those darkest parts which are hardest to face. Then we will be able to listen to others, even their darkest parts. And listen to ourselves and to others without condemnation.

Be quick to hear, slow to speak.

Jesus was quick to listen. He listened to the ache of the human soul. He listened to the ache of our world as it groaned in travail. On the cross, he listened and took all that he heard to himself and did not condemn but forgave.

* * *

They brought to Jesus one who was deaf and who had a speech impediment and they besought Jesus to lay his hand upon that person.

And we come to Jesus as people who are deaf and who have a speech impediment.

And Jesus still says to us, *Ephphatha, be opened.*

And our deafness is opened, that which kept us from speaking forgiving words is released.

And we are in a relationship with God and with each other, a shared relationship, individual yet as one.