

## September 9, 2018

Is 35:4-7a; Jas 2:1-5; Mk 7:31-37

I wonder how people treated the deaf man from the gospel today. Like all people who are “different” people probably treated him differently. It seems that we all have a tendency to treat those who are less attractive to us a little differently (and I mean “less attractive” in a broad way: either by physical appearance, disability, annoying behavior, or potential to embarrass us). We don’t have to treat them differently, but it is a natural human tendency. “Studies have consistently shown that attractive people get favorable treatment ... attractive individuals are more likely to be recommended for a job, considered more qualified, ... and are more likely to be hired ... And the bias doesn’t stop [there]. Attractive people are also more likely to be paid more for a job, are more likely to be promoted, and less likely to be fired.” And that is just how that bias applies to employment - what about all the other areas of life? We can find ourselves at times on one side or other of this bias; a tendency to bias that can seriously effect our relationships with others.

In our second reading James instructs us to not make distinctions among others. To not treat the rich better than the poor. To not show better treatment to one over another because of the externals of looks, behaviors, or what they can do for us. We are called to see the deep value of all human life, and the dignity that demands that we work against the tendency to judge people according to the externals. Jesus did this. He approached the outcasts - the disabled, the sick, the criminals, and the unwanted. He saw the deep yearning to be free in all those who are pushed to one side due to the human tendency we have been speaking of. When he touches the deaf man to heal him Jesus himself gave voice to the pain that the man could not. Jesus groaned to lend his voice to that man’s exile and suffering. We hear: *He looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, “Ephphatha!” - that is, “Be opened!” And immediately the man’s ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly.* As a result of his encounter with Jesus the man could now hear and speak clearly. The thing that caused him to be separated from others - the thing that they used to judge him - was removed.

We all have some obstacles, some pains, some weaknesses, some biases that threaten to separated us from God and our fellow humans. Jesus wants to come to each of us as he did to

the man in the Gospel - he wants to open our ears to hear his Word, and open our eyes to see. St Gregory Nazianzen encourages us to approach the Lord and accept this healing touch:

“If you were deaf and dumb, let the Word sound in your ears ... Do not shut your ears to the Instruction of the Lord, and to His counsel ... If you are blind and unenlightened, lighten your eyes that you sleep not in death.” Once we are enlightened, once our ears, eyes, and mouths are opened - what will we do?

Will we be able to stand up for the weak and marginalized, will we turn to Jesus when we are pushed aside, will we tell others of what wonders God can do? Just like the man in the Gospel we sometimes experience people not wanting to hear what we have to say when we stand up for what is right and speak the words of the Lord. This is unattractive to some people (just like the speech impediment of the deaf man), and as a result, like him we can feel the cold shoulder of people pushing us aside when we say these things. But we must continue to give voice to these groanings. Pope Benedict once remarked: “ We must ask ourselves: have not we Christians become perhaps too silent? Do we not perhaps lack the courage to speak out and witness as did those who witnessed the healing of the deaf-mute in the [Gospel]? Our world needs this witness; above all, it is waiting for the common testimony of Christians.”

Jesus joined himself to the pain and marginalization of the deaf man and added his own voice to his feelings of being ignored. Jesus’ groan to heaven was heard and the man was opened. He can do the same for us when we approach him and ask for him to touch us. Jesus’ contact with the deaf man was intimate - he wants so much to touch us that he offers himself in the Eucharist to enter us as he did to the deaf man’s ears and tongue. Then, like that deaf man, we can be opened to proclaim the wonders of God to others. Jesus looks for us to use our voices help to open the hears and eyes of our fellow humans. Our groans for the outsiders will help secure more just treatment of those who are pushed aside for being less “attractive.” Our faith can draw others to Jesus. Such a witness will not only help secure the rights of others, but will bring more people to Jesus’ touch. Things can sometimes look a little bleak, but our collective efforts will help in ushering in a that time spoken of in the first reading: [A time when] *the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; [when] the lame [will] leap like a stag, [and] the tongue of the mute will sing.*