

## ***A Healing Word***

Text: Isaiah 35: 5-7; Mark 7: 31-37

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**I want us to turn our thoughts around a curious word today.** It's a Biblical word, though it makes only one appearance in the scriptures. It's a commanding word asking and expecting something. Most of all it's a healing word spoken for the good of every soul – yours and mine not withstanding.

With a little help from my friend Google, and the click of my mouse, I discovered something of its etymology. I learned that it's the Greek form of an Aramaic word. It's pronounced ephphatha. Ephphatha. Say it with me: ephphatha.

It means, "be opened" or "be released." And once upon a Palestinian afternoon Jesus used this word in a healing encounter as both an invitation and demand. Apparently, he knew that healing and being open are somehow related.

So let's just trace the story. And let's take a few pauses in the telling - just to be sure we are taking it all in. As we do, let's be thinking about our own lives because the story is not only about something that happened once upon a time to someone else.

**We start with a nameless man in need of healing.** That's a convenient Biblical clue and gift at the same time. Because the fact that he bears no name opens up the possibility that he could also bear any name. Julia or Nan or Elliott or Geordie.

Frederick Buechner once said, "The story of any one of us is, to some extent, the story of us all." The more that I listen to my own life and to the lives of others, the more solid that truth comes home. And so the unnamed soul in the story could really be any of us.

More. Anonymity, being anonymous, is where most of us linger when it comes to our own need for healing. We don't want to tell anyone when or how we are hurting. Most especially when the reality of our brokenness is not readily visible or apparent.

But anonymous or not the nameless one in the story wanted to be healed. His close circle of friends understood this. And they also knew that his impediment might be resolved by an effort to get him near to Jesus. So they waited strategically. And when Jesus came close, they asked for his personal touch and attention.

**And then we go deeper.** These friends told Jesus what the problem was because the man could not speak for himself. That was his infirmity. He was both mute and deaf – unable to speak or to hear. And those two difficulties can come together, and can chase and exacerbate one another. So Jesus did a lovely thing. He took the man aside where the challenges of hearing and speaking could be set apart – and it would be just the two of them face to face. It was about as up-front and close as a moment could ever get. And then Jesus reached and put his fingers in the man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle.

Danish philosopher Soren Keirkegaard says “in the eyes of God, the Infinite Spirit, all of the millions that have lived before and now live do not make a crowd. God only sees each individual.”

Paul Tillich rings true here, too. He coined the phrase “the eternal now” in reference to those moments in life that fall out of time; moments when the instant of now can reveal that which is eternal.

So Jesus moved from the abstraction of many to the single soul before him. And together they fell into an eternal moment.

**A final step takes us back to that healing word.** Ephphatha! Be opened! Still touching that man, and looking up to heaven, Jesus said that word in a whisper or a sigh or a prayer – depending on the translation you prefer.

Now I wonder. Was Jesus speaking to the incapacity of his ears or the dexterity of his tongue – or both together? Or was Jesus calling the man to be free and open from his bondage of a larger sort, too? Not only his sense of hearing and speaking but his heart and his life, his soul and his mind?

Howard Thurman, mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., discovered that being well in his own life and maintaining an open spirit were two sides of one coin. He also discovered that he needed God’s daily help to keep his spirit open. And so he wrote this prayer.

“Eternal God, open to me, this day, light for my darkness. Open to me courage for my fear and hope for my despair. Open to me peace for my turmoil. Open to me strength for my weakness. Open to me forgiveness for my sins and mercy where I am broken. Open to me, this day, thyself for myself.”

**Back to today and our being here this morning.** I hope that by now you have been able to shift into being autobiographical in your listening. That is that you are thinking not about then but about now. And not about the man in the story but about you. And not about his struggles and impediments, but about your own. And not about what he needed from Jesus, up close and personal, but about what you might need. And me as well. Because it’s so very true: the story of any one of us is, to some extent, the story of us all.

It’s an important ending to note that the man who bore no name, who was anonymous in revealing his anguish, who needed a little help from his friends in finding healing, who was surprised by the absolute and personal attention of Jesus, and who heard the sigh from Jesus’ “ephphatha” . . . was healed. His ears were opened, his tongue released, and his future set free.

May our hearts grow larger as we wonder of such things today – for the one with no name, and for us. Amen.

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