

Sermon at Hannover International Worship on 17.10.2010

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Mark 7, 31-37

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

The difference between animals and human beings is the use of words to speak. By using words human beings can explain their feelings, emotions and ask for help. You cannot explain yourself unless you speak. You cannot speak unless you hear the words. The ability to hear will help you to learn to speak. In order to speak you need healthy ears and healthy tongues. If we do not hear properly, if we do not speak clearly and if our eyes do not see clearly, we have a communication problem. Lack of communication could be a cause of misunderstanding and misunderstanding leads to conflict.

Thus deafness, muteness and blindness could be a social problem to any society that needs to be solved. The sermon text I chose for today is found in the Gospel of Mark 7, 31-37 and it is about the story of the deaf and mute man who was

brought to Jesus to be healed. Before I come to this sermon text, let me tell you a story of deaf, mute and blind people in Ethiopia.

There was a widow who was living in a village looking after sheep. She lived from the income she got from the sheep farm. One day she left her sheep in a meadow to graze and went to wash her clothes at the river side. After washing her clothes she came back to the meadow but all her sheep were not there. She was very much worried and ran in one direction to look for her lost sheep.

On the way she saw an old man who was also a widow and asked him if he had seen her sheep. Due to old age the man did not hear properly and had also a problem of speaking clearly. He understood that the woman had asked him where he had come from and answered by pointing his finger in one direction and said, “I’ve come from there, from working in my field.” The woman also had a hearing problem and she understood that he had seen her sheep going in the direction he pointed to. So she went to the direction he showed by his finger and found all her sheep. She was happy and wanted to make the old man also happy. She saw one small lamb with a broken leg and carried it in

her arms to the old man and said “I found my sheep and want to give you this lamb as a gift of my appreciation to you”. The man did not hear properly what she said, but understood that she was accusing him of breaking the leg of the lamb and wanted compensation, and he shouted at her saying “No, I did not break it, you cannot blame me for it and you won’t get a single birr (Ethiopian money) from me”. The woman understood that he wanted the big sheep instead of this injured one. So she answered him, “I did not even promise to give you something and we did not make an agreement. This is a free gift and you cannot get more than this” she shouted at him. Neither listened to what the other person said, but each shouted loudly to the extent that people of the village heard the noise and came with a guard from the village. The guard was responsible for order in the village and took both the man and the woman to a known judge, accusing them of disturbing the peace of the village.

The judge was known for passing correct judgments and following their implementations. However he had become very old, and due to old age he did not see properly, his ears had problems and he heard only a few words. He let them speak their points one after another.

First the woman told the story of her lost sheep that this man had helped her to find by showing the direction they went. She found all her sheep and offered this little lamb that she carried to show her appreciation. However this man refused her free gift and wanted more. “Your Excellency, Judge, does he deserve more from a poor widow?” Thus she concluded her speech.

Next spoke the old man saying that he is free from crime, he had never done such a thing to an animal in all his life and that he was innocent, but this lady accused him of a crime he had not committed, and she wanted to get money from him. “Your Excellency, she will not get a single coin from me,” and thus he concluded his speech.

The judge tried to bring together all the information he assumed he had heard and seen. He understood that the man and the woman were husband and wife, what the woman was carrying was a small child, that they had quarreled and were asking for a divorce. From this assumption he asked the question “How long have you been married?” The woman understood that the judge asked how many sheep she had and she answered, “Twenty, your Excellency!” The judge said, “You have lived together for twenty years, God

gave you this small child and now you are asking for a divorce. This is wrong and cannot happen, because your little child needs parental care. Therefore my judgment is that you go and live together in peace as you did before. “

Of course the woman and the man did not understand what the judge said and they asked his assistants to explain the verdict. The man explained that the sentence was that the man and the woman should live peacefully together as husband and wife in their home and care for this little child. The man and woman were surprised and said, “We don’t even know each other. How can this happen?” The assistant of the judge said “The judge is known for not reversing what he has once decided and for following the implementation of his decision. If you fail to obey, he will send you to jail. Therefore, it is an appropriate time for you to look for a priest and get married soon”. The old man and woman were afraid to go to prison; instead they looked for a priest, got married and lived together for a long time without quarreling with each other, because the one did not understand what the other said anyway.

The Ethiopian story seems to have a good end. However the story is full of misunderstandings that led to false judgment.

One needs to have healthy ears to hear properly, a healthy tongue to speak properly and healthy eyes to see clearly.

The deaf ear, the mute tongue and the blind eyes need to be healed.

In our sermon text from the Gospel of Mark 7, 31-37, we read the story of a deaf and mute man whom his friends brought to Jesus to be healed and that Jesus healed him.

The word deaf means “*to be blunt or to be dull*”. It may have been that this man lost his hearing as the result of an injury; or he may have been born deaf. Either way, this poor man cannot hear. Not only was he deaf, but he also had a speech problem. He could say something, but his listeners could not understand him. These two conditions seem to go hand in hand. Because the deaf persons cannot hear themselves saying words, they tend to have trouble using verbal language correctly.

While this man’s condition is tragic, there is a blessing in this story. The deaf and mute man had friends who cared for him. They heard that Jesus was passing by and they brought their deaf friend to Jesus. They just believed that the man who had cast demons out of the people could heal their poor handicapped friend.

Then Jesus healed him, demonstrating some actions. Three things are to be noticed how Jesus healed this man.

1. Jesus took him aside

To be handicapped is to be neglected or despised by the society of Jews, because they believed that such diseases were caused by sin, therefore must be rejected. For example those who had leprosy should be separated from the community, forced to live alone. Such sick people were rejected by society and suffered from loneliness. By taking a deaf man aside, Jesus associated himself with this handicapped man. He loved people who were often cast aside by others. Jesus spent much time ministering to those with physical infirmities because He had a heart full of love and compassion for their needs. Jesus accepts and loves them just as they are.

The handicapped are looking for that kind of love. Even today in our time, handicapped people are rejected by the society just because they are different from the so-called normal people. However Jesus loves them as they are and so should we! There are many handicapped people who would love to hear the Gospel, if someone only cared enough to tell them.

By taking the deaf mute aside, Jesus is saying, “*You are more than a problem, you are an individual and you are important to me! I care about you!*”

We, the normal people, feel loneliness when we are rejected or cast by friends. At this moment we have to remember that Jesus is at our side and says to you and to me today, you are important to me, my love is with you and I care for you.

2. Jesus put his finger into the ears of the deaf man and touched his tongue

Jesus continues His special ministry in this man's life. He cannot tell the man verbally what He is about to do, so Jesus uses a rough form of sign language to communicate His intentions. First, He sticks His fingers in the man's ears to let him know that He is going to do something about his deafness. His touching was not strong shaking, but is a soft and delightful touch that reached to the point of his problem. Jesus touched the depressed part of this man; He touched his depressed soul also. Jesus heals what depresses our souls. The touching of Jesus also awakened the faith in this man's heart.

Touching the man's tongue Jesus lubricated the speech of the person. He gave him words to speak about himself and about

his feelings. Jesus healed him in such a way that his speech gets value in the society.

Dear brothers and sisters, if our speech is not valued before people, it is valued before Jesus. Or if we have a problem of expressing ourselves and other people do not understand what we are saying, then we decide often to keep quiet. Then we have to remember that Jesus hears not only the speeches of our tongues, but also listens to the speeches of our hearts. He is ready to open our quietness. The story of healing the deaf and mute teaches us that Jesus opens our quietness and helps us to speak. He is ready to give us words to explain our feelings and emotions.

3. Jesus opened the heaven for him

The Bible tells us that after touching the deaf and mute man, Jesus looks towards Heaven. This act served two purposes. First, it told the deaf man where the healing was coming from. Jesus was looking to His Father and He was telling this man, via sign language, that his healing was coming from above. This act of looking towards Heaven also demonstrated the Son's dependence upon the Father. Jesus often looked to Heaven for the help He needed. He did this at the tomb of

Lazarus, **John 11:41**. Jesus lived a life of close communion with the Father.

After looking into heaven, Jesus said one word, “*Ephphatha*”, which means “*be opened*”. When Jesus said this, the man’s ears were healed and his tongue was loosened. He could hear! He could speak! Oh, what a miracle! One command from Jesus and his life changed forever! That is the power of the Word of God!

Dear brothers and sisters!

Deaf and mute should not be interpreted literally. It could be also metaphorical speech. We often see some people who do not give their opinions in public because they are afraid to speak. Such people could be mute due to the sayings of other people. For instance we hear people saying to somebody, you talk nonsense, your sayings have no value, and you do not know what to say and how to say it. You’d better keep quite. Such humiliating words could make people mute so that they refrain from giving their opinions in public.

Or in countries where there is no freedom of speech people are punished because of their opinions, therefore many people prefer to be quiet. People’s thinking, people’s idea are

suppressed, therefore they cannot say what they think. The dictators make people deaf and mute.

Or rich people bribe some people not to speak the truth. If we look only at our advantages, we cannot speak the truth and we become mute. That is why most people pretend to be diplomats and speak only comfortable words that people easily accept. Then the truth is hidden, because of the deafness and muteness in the society.

The Church should not wait that the truth be spoken by the politicians or other movements in society. I say this because there are people in the Church who are more diplomats than the politicians. There are examples from church leaders who argue that the church should be free from politics and take a neutral position. There are many Christians who advocate for the neutrality of the church and say she should not interfere in politics.

I would like to give one example from Ethiopia where I come from. The Ethiopian constitution says “the religious institutions should not interfere in the government affairs and the government should not interfere in the religious affairs”. People use such a constitution as an excuse not to speak the

truth when the people in government do injustice to the poor. I do not believe the position of the church to be neutral. If the church's position is neutral, she cannot proclaim the Gospel. The church should take the side of the truth as Jesus did. Jesus was at the side of the oppressed and the poor. The Church that does not hear the truth and does not speak the truth is deaf and mute. Jesus calls all Christians today to be opened, to hear the truth and to speak the truth even if it is inconvenient. That is how I understand the word "Ephatha". The power of the Gospel opens our hearts, it removes our depressions, and it liberates us from all oppressions and gives us freedom. May the healing Gospel help us to be opened to listen to ourselves, to listen to the truth, to speak the truth and be the voice for the voiceless people! Amen.