

GOSPEL FOR THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Mark 7:31-37

Then He returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to Him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged Him to lay His hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, He put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, He sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more He charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

1. Just as everywhere the Gospels depict our Lord Christ as a merciful and gracious man who is ready to help everyone with words and works in body and soul, so also this Gospel reading depicts for us how willingly He helped this poor man, who was mute and deaf. It does this to stir us up to faith, so that we expect everything good from Him. In this way, He sets a pattern and example for us of how every Christian should imitate Him and also help his neighbor.

2. A Christian life consists in this: that, first, we believe and trust in our Savior, Christ, and are assured that we are not forsaken by Him, no matter what need or danger happens. Second, every Christian should also act toward friend and enemy the way he sees that Christ is so willing to help everyone. Whoever does this is a Christian. Whoever does not do this, however, may be called a Christian but is not one. These two cannot be separated; the fruit of faith must follow, or the faith is not real. This is the summary of this Gospel reading.

3. Now, some have been persuaded that what is important in this miracle above other things is that the Lord Christ takes the poor man, leads him away from the people, uses special ceremonies, places His fingers in the man's ears, spits and touches his tongue, looks up to heaven, sighs, and uses an unusual word ["Ephphatha," Mark 7:34], even though He previously helped other mutes and many others without such unusual ceremonies, but only with a

word. All of this, I say, has persuaded some to explain that this time Christ was thinking that this man whom He was now helping would in the future sin with his tongue and ears. He took pity on him because this sin would still happen after such a great work, and His benefit would be applied so badly, so that a mute tongue would become a blasphemous tongue which would not only slander his neighbors but also revile God in heaven above; and the ears which were opened so that they should hear God's Word would rather listen to all kinds of erroneous and false teaching instead of God's Word. This, they say, was the reason why He sighed and looked up to heaven.

4. We do not want to reject this opinion. Nevertheless, we must not consider Christ so narrowly, as if He looked only at one person; we must look at Him better than if He took an interest only in this man. All of Holy Scripture, especially the Prophets and Psalms, tells us that He was sent to take a sincere interest in all the distress of the whole human race. They tell us that Christ is the special, chosen person, above all the saints, who has us on His heart, so that He takes an interest in all our distress as if it were His own distress. In Psalm 40 [:12] He says about our sins: "My sins have taken hold of Me, so that I cannot see"; and in Psalm 41 [:4]: "Lord, be gracious to Me and heal My soul, for I have sinned against You." Here the merciful Lord is speaking in the persona of us and carries our sins as if they were His own and as if He had Himself committed them. He says further in Psalm 49 [69:5]: "God, You know My folly, and My shame is not hidden from You." Likewise, Isaiah 53 [:6]: "The Lord threw all our sins on Him." Likewise: "He carried our sickness and burdened Himself with our sorrows. The punishment is on Him, so that we would have peace," etc. (Isaiah 53 [:4-5]). Other Scripture passages also point this out.

5. The Lord Christ is to be painted in such a way that He is the only person who takes on Himself the misfortune not of one city or of one land, but of the whole world. St. John also christens Him: "Look, this is the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world" [John 1:29]. However, if He bears the sin, it follows that He must also have carried everything which belongs to sin and results from sin, such as the devil, death, and hell.

6. The reason He sighs here is that He is the person who was to do this, of whom the prophets long before had announced that He would take sincere pity on all the hurts of the whole human race. He was concerned not only about the one tongue and ears of this poor man, but it was a general sighing over all tongues and ears—yes, over every heart, body, soul, and all people from Adam to the last human being who is yet to be born. Therefore, He does not sigh mainly because this man would still in the future commit many sins, but the main reason is that He saw how the devil had brought the whole mass of flesh and blood into mortal harm in Paradise, made people

mute and deaf, and thus put them into death and hellfire. Christ had this view before His eyes and saw what great harm the devil had caused through one man's fall in Paradise [Rom. 5:12]. He looks not only at two ears, but at the whole crowd descended from Adam and still to come. Thus this Gospel reading paints Christ as the one who takes an interest in you and me and all of us in the way we ought to take an interest in ourselves, as if He were stuck in the sins and harm in which we are stuck; He sighs about the devil who has brought about this harm.

7. This certainly is the reason that He takes such serious interest here and uses special customs and gestures. It is as if He means to say, "I so take to heart this misery that you are captive in sin and death that I must act in a special way because of these thoughts." He acts so strangely, compared to His other works, that it is surprising. He often healed others with a word or drove the devil out of them with a word. He even helped some to whom He never came, such as the centurion's servant (Matthew 8 [:13]).¹ Here, however, because of two infirmities (tongue and ears) He uses special gestures, as if He were especially concerned with pointing out to us that at this time He had a special regard for and thoughts about the human race.

8. We must concede that just as Christ, our Lord and God, had all other human characteristics (sin excepted), He also did not always think the same, was not always equally ready or ardent, but He had it in various ways, just like other saints. Because His heart and thoughts were now somewhat unusual, He also uses unusual gestures. Thus we must see that He was a true man in body and soul, who did not always think the same, just as He was not always hungry or sleepy at the same time, but just as these things vary with us men, so they also varied with Him. St. Paul says, "He took a servant's form and became like any other man and was found in appearance like any other man," etc. (Philippians 2 [:7]). We must understand this not only externally but also in the soul and thoughts of His heart, so that now He was ardent and another time even more ardent, etc.

This, now, is one reason why Christ acts this way, namely, that He is a true man. Yet in His person He stood in the place of all people and at the same time took an interest in the infirmities of this man and of all people.

9. The second thing which distressed Him was certainly also correct, namely, that if He would heal this man, he might afterward still sin much. However, it is applied too narrowly when it is explained only about the future sins of this man. Christ, our Lord God, had to be distressed and suffer not only for one man's sin but, as Revelation [13:8] says, for all sins which were committed "from the beginning of the world," from Adam to us to the last

¹ See sermon for Third Sunday after Epiphany on Matt. 8:1-13, paragraphs 8-10; see also *Annotations on Matthew 1-18* (1534-35/1538), LW 67:44-45.

person who is to be born before the Last Day. This is why it is much too narrow to apply this only to future sins which this man would still commit. Nevertheless, in other places He showed that He did look ahead to the future life of some people, such as the paralytic to whom He said, "You have now been healed; sin no more, lest something worse happen to you" (John 5 [:14]).

10. The dear Lord Christ has such a kind heart that it grieves Him when someone commits sin. He certainly knows that sin cannot remain unpunished. This is why He even wept over the city of Jerusalem, for He saw that her sin must be punished [Luke 19:41]. He has such a kind and loving heart that He has no pleasure in evil.

11. However, He is occupied especially with these two members, the ears and the tongue, because the kingdom of Christ is founded on the Word, which cannot be comprehended or grasped other than through these two organs, ears and tongue. He rules in the hearts of people only through the Word and faith. The ears grasp the Word, the heart believes it, and the tongue speaks or confesses what the heart believes. Therefore, if we do away with the tongue and ears, there is no significant difference between the kingdom of Christ and of the world.

12. A Christian goes about his external life just like an unbeliever: he builds, tills, and plows like any other; he undertakes no special activity or work, not in eating, drinking, working, sleeping, or anything else. Only these two organs make a difference between Christians and unbelievers, because a Christian speaks and listens differently and has a tongue which praises God's grace and preaches that the Lord Christ is the only Savior, etc. The world does not do this, but speaks about greed and other vices and preaches and praises its own splendor.

13. But then each side has special ears. Christians' ears have the same Word which the tongue speaks and the heart believes, but the world prefers to listen when people speak about its wisdom, reason, honor, and splendor. Thus the ears and tongue of Christians are different from the world's and unbelievers' ears and tongues; they do not care for silver or gold, but only for what people say about Christ and how they are to speak and preach about Christ.

14. The dear Lord, of course, saw what harm and misery would yet come through tongues and ears. It is a great harm when Christians are persecuted, drowned, burned, and hanged, and the world opposes the Word with its fists. This harm, however, does not tear through and does not finally succeed. When it is heard that people are being wronged in this way, they grow only more daring and bold and despise such torture and suffering. Therefore, this is not the greatest harm which is inflicted on Christendom by the tyrants. Rather, that piece of flesh which is stuck behind the teeth² does the greatest

2 I.e., the tongue.

harm to the kingdom of Christ. I am not now speaking about when people lie to and speak evil about one another, but I am speaking about these high matters to which the tongue does such great harm after Christ has released it and given it the Gospel. It certainly does not appear to be harmful; it appears to be much worse when a head is cut off than when a false preacher or writer crops up. But false preaching—yes, one false word which comes along in God's name—cuts away a great number of souls, so that an entire city and country may fall after it.

15. This, now, is the affliction which caused Christ to sigh. It is as if He meant to say: "Watch out and beware of false tongues which find their way into Scripture! The tongues in taverns or bars also certainly do harm, but here, when the tongues which I have released begin to speak and brag about being Christians, beware of them," etc. [cf. Matt. 7:15]. In fact, it certainly is lamentable when those who have the Word and know how to prattle much about it nevertheless persecute the Word with their tongues and fists. The Turk also harms Christendom, but this happens only with the sword and is never equal to the harm done by the sectarian spirits, so that one could still sigh over such tongues which mislead so many people and nevertheless want to be called Christians and to be regarded as improving the Christian Church. This is one way in which the devil (after the tongue has been released and people know how to preach what Christ is) still overturns the teaching and causes harm in this way.

16. Accordingly, He says, there are also shameful ears—which I have opened—which want to listen to nothing else than such false, harmful tongues. St. Paul says: "There will be a time when they will not tolerate wholesome teaching, but according to their own desires they will take for themselves teachers according as their ears itch, and will turn their ears away from the truth and turn to fables," etc. (2 Timothy 4 [:3-4]). Preachers who teach in this way are villains and the devil's apostles. Now, the others should be good enough to say, "I will not listen to those tongues." "Yes," says St. Paul, "they do not want to listen to a holy tongue but seek another, which they also find," just as now happens with our sectarians. This is why St. Paul says "as their ears itch." So He will send them preachers who will forcibly lead them into error. We saw under the papacy that no one could restrain even the least error, but people easily regarded as an article of faith their fictitious purgatory, indulgences, ghosts, and whatever was new. Thus the devil scratched their ears, so that they much preferred to listen to this deception than to God's Word.

17. This is happening now too. Our Lord God has opened the ears so that they have heard the true Gospel. Wherever a sectarian turns up, however, the people immediately cry out and become so foolish and so hostile to the

other, true preachers that I am astonished that such excellent hearts, to whom I would have entrusted body and soul, could become so spitefully hostile to us, as if they were full of the devil. They sin much worse with tongues and ears than before they had the Gospel, so that it would be much better if they had never been healed by the Lord Christ and had not heard His Word at all.

18. Christ sighs here not only because He took on Himself all the infirmities of nature from the beginning of the world but also because He lamented that after the Gospel [was preached] His kingdom would receive such harm through those whom He had helped, and that His kingdom should be so buffeted and rent, which would never have happened if people had not first been helped by Him. Well, He has to endure it, and we also have to endure it, but He will not for this reason have sighed in vain.

19. Although what kind of sighing this was is not stated here, since that cannot be written—for, as St. Paul says [Rom. 8:26], such sighing cannot be written in letters or spoken in words—nevertheless, woe to those who do this harm and despise this sighing, and then go away as if they had done right. Christ had very many other anxious thoughts about this, namely, these: “Well, what it costs Me is that I must endure much anguish and torture before I bring these people to the point that they preach and listen to My Word; and still they will shamelessly falsify and overturn it and do significant harm to My kingdom!” This ingratitude toward the Word must give pain to every Christian. Because these thoughts had especially struck Him at that time, it is unsurprising that the Lord Christ was so affected that He here uses special customs and gestures.

20. From these ceremonies which Christ uses here, we should learn[, first,] that Christ our Lord takes sincere interest in us; we should give diligent attention to keeping our ears and tongues the way He gave them to us; and we should be careful that the devil and people do not subvert our tongue and ears. Second, we—each in his estate³—should be thankful for this benefit toward His Word, so that a prince in his territory, a preacher in the pulpit, and father and mother in the home carry out their office correctly. The others are to listen, keep their ears open as Christ has opened them, and diligently look at how Christ acted with this man, so that they thank God that He is just as much in earnest with them.

21. God be praised, the tongue has advanced so far with us that we speak purely, and ears gladly listen, for there are still many righteous people everywhere who listen to God’s Word with delight. At the same time, however, we also have great ingratitude and abominable contempt for the Word of

3 According to Luther, there are three “estates” or “hierarchies” that God has established for the benefit of mankind: the household (*oeconomia*, which includes marriage and family), secular government, and the church.

God, and even secret persecution and secret suffering. Other princes persecute it openly. We, however, sit here under protection, as in a rose garden,⁴ and yet secretly there are many townsmen and peasants and noblemen with their golden chains who would like to drive out all pastors and preachers, if only they could. This is an indication that people despise the Word and are secretly hostile to it, as we see that this is what happens: the Word will only be where it is publicly persecuted—but where it is free and public, they do not want it.

22. However, our Lord God certainly did not sigh in vain. People certainly think that because He is silent, it will remain this way forever. But a pulpit can very quickly be changed. For this reason, our Lord God wants to warn us here about what was prophesied through St. Paul [2 Tim. 4:3], so that we beware. Tongues will be corrupted, and the people's ears will itch for false preachers. This happened under the papacy, when people were diligent and ardent about hearing and doing, provided someone came and dared to say something new, no matter how absurd and strange the assertion was. If someone had come and preached that they should build a church in the Elbe River, they would have done it!

Now, however, when the Word has been brought into the pulpit and people are taught to trust God and serve their neighbor, it is nowhere followed in life. This is the devil himself, but we are not for this reason excused.

23. After the teaching has been brought into such a form and shape that what we are to believe is preached correctly, and the tongues are released and the ears opened, then we should also take an interest in bringing this into our lives. I fear, however, that this does not happen until, as St. Paul says, the lightning and thunder strikes. He has already begun with the pope and Antichrist to strike with the lightning of the Gospel, which is "the Spirit of His mouth," which is open and speaks, and which always strikes among the godless. I fear, however, that this teaching will not afterward follow in life, until He comes and completely knocks down everything and "puts an end to the godless way of life through the appearance of His glorious coming" (2 Thessalonians 2 [8]).

24. Now, because this teaching does not fully come into our works and life, as it ought to be, I fear that our Lord God, unless the Last Day strikes first, will not delay this punishment. It will not at all follow in our lives, not even in the least, that we serve our neighbor, which is not set too high. We do not need to run to Rome or to St. James,⁵ nor to give money or goods for that; simply give your assent. However, because we are such desperate people, who

⁴ *wie in einem Rosengarten*, that is, in supreme well-being.

⁵ That is, the shrine of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, one of the most popular pilgrimage sites of the Middle Ages.

previously did too much under the papacy and now do nothing, either the Last Day must strike, or our Lord God will send heresies so that we again do what is unnecessary. The Lord Christ is fervently concerned when His Word is despised and persecuted. Therefore, those who cause this will not get away. This is now enough about this text.