

Ephphatha
Mark 7:24-37

How many of you remember taking the written part of your drivers' test? The part that most concerned me was the signs. I wasn't sure I would be able to make sense of all of them. If I missed any, I figured it would be the signs.

There were some signs in our readings today. Did you make sense of them all, or did you miss some?

Isaiah gave a sign that would point people to the promised Messiah: *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.*

That one was pretty obvious. You hear those words and think of how Jesus fulfilled them. That sign is clear; it's kind of hard to miss.

Some of the signs we see along the road aren't hanging on a post. I don't think they are official American Sign Language, but we can make sense of them. On Thursday, when I drove to Delaware, a woman in a bright orange vest first waved her arm back and forth to get my attention, then held her arm still with her palm facing me indicating that I should stop. I did so, and waited until she turned her sign on a post from STOP to SLOW and then beckoned me forward with her hand and pointed to the side of the cones on which I was to drive. I gave a polite wave as I drove past her.

Some people were not so polite when I had that summer job during college. Some would show their disapproval at having to stop by holding up a single finger. And it wasn't this one (index finger).

Others would express their displeasure by sticking their tongue out at me. I guess they weren't worried about how silly they looked as adults sticking their tongues out.

Is that why Jesus took the deaf man *aside from the crowd privately*? Some might have thought it silly for Jesus to stick His fingers in the man's ears.

No, we know enough about Jesus to know that He was not concerned appearances. He was concerned about people. He cared for this man and wanted to give him some one on one attention. *And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears ...* Using this sign, Jesus told the man, "I know your ears don't work. I'm going to do something about that."

What does our reading say next? *and after spitting touched his tongue...* Did Jesus spit on the man? No. On His own fingers before He touched the man's tongue? No, it was another sign. Jesus is telling the man, "I know you can't speak. I'm going to do something about that, too."

We have one more sign from Jesus for the man: *And looking up to heaven, he sighed...* They go together. Both things were for the man to see. I found this quote in one of my commentaries: "[H]eavenly help is one that should be sought with the sigh of earnest longing, a sigh that is in itself already a prayer." (Lenski, *Mark*, p. 310) Jesus points to the source of the healing the man is about to receive and to a heavenly Father who is always ready to hear our deepest concerns.

Having gotten these messages across to the man with these signs, Jesus speaks, "*Ephphatha*," that is, "*Be opened*." And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke

plainly. Jesus' word makes it happen. It accomplishes what He desires.

Whether or not it seemed silly to some for Jesus to use these signs to bring healing to the man, He chose to use them.

There are other signs Jesus chooses to use which seem silly to some: Baptism and His Supper. They would say, "Faith and the forgiveness of sins by applying water to someone's head? I don't think so. It's just water and some words."

It is plain water, but when it is combined with not just some words, but Jesus' word of promise, it becomes a cherished means of grace.

When there is a baptism here, I read these words: Dearly beloved, Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Matthew, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In the last chapter of Mark our Lord promises, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." And the apostle Peter has written, "Baptism now saves you."

It may seem silly to some, but Jesus uses baptism to open the kingdom of heaven.

Silly to some is the idea that Jesus' body and blood are in the bread and wine of His Supper for the forgiveness of sins. "How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?" I took that question right out of the Catechism. The answer given is this: "Certainly not just eating and drinking do these things, but the words written here: 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.' These words, along with the bodily eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament.

Whoever believes these words has exactly what they say: 'forgiveness of sins.'"

The forgiveness of sins Jesus earned for you on His cross He delivers to you in the bread and wine – the body and blood – of His Supper. In this way also He opens the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is very busy opening. He spoke to the ears and tongue of the man in our text, "*Ephphatha*," that is, "*Be opened*." and it was so. Without getting into all of the details, Jesus basically said the same thing to the Syrophenician woman. She was a Gentile – considered by most to be outside the kingdom of heaven. But we hear Jesus commend her for her faith. Her confession of faith is a sign that the kingdom of heaven has been opened to her.

I'm going to try out a little sign language on you. We haven't used Matins in a while, but I'm hoping some of you will remember a few words of the Te Deum. I'm going to sing a little bit of it, then point my finger at you. That will be your sign to join me in singing the next phrase.

"When You took upon Yourself to deliver man, You humbled Yourself to be born of a virgin. When You had overcome the sharpness of death, (sign) You opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers."

That's what Jesus does. That is what Jesus is doing here this morning as you hear His word and receive His gifts. There is no test to worry about passing. Simply see the signs, hear the signs, and know that Jesus has opened to you the kingdom of heaven. Amen.