

A Tongue Loosened for What?

(Mark 7:31 – 37)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's sermon is a prepared sermon by Pastor Sherman Stenson, St Paul's Lutheran Church.

“If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Cast it from you. For it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.” As John Madden is fond of saying, “Hey, wait a minute!”

Our Scripture lessons for today do NOT include the one about cutting off our hand, do they? Instead, we heard about lots of other body parts: Hearts and eyes and ears and leaping legs from Isaiah. And we heard about sitting near one's feet, and viewing things through eyes in a certain way, from St. James.

And in the Gospel, Jesus deals with body parts, too. In the text immediately before today's reading, a Syrophenician woman falls at His feet and begs Him to cast out an unclean spirit from her daughter's mind, soul, and body. Then He opens the ears and loosens the tongue of a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. And, despite His charge to those who witnessed or heard about this miracle to keep it a secret, many of them disobeyed and shot off their mouths. Yes, many of our sins involve our body parts, but just as often require nothing more than a rebellious mind.

Our most offensive appendage, though, the one which gets us into the most trouble, the one that stops our consciences, and causes us to think of nothing but pleasure and self as the blood drains from our brains, is not our hand.

If something is to be cut off to keep us from sinning, if one member of our bodies causes more trouble and places us into more peril than all the others, we know which appendage it would be. It is not the hand. It is the tongue.

The greatest and most dangerous temptations don't come from our hands. They don't arise because our feet carried us down the wrong path, our eyes saw the wrong things, or our ears heard something offensive. Our worst dangers and sins don't arise from our digestive systems or even our reproductive organs. They come from what we say.

By the mouth of a person, his or her heart is known. Our wicked minds soil our lips. It is not merely by the foul language we might sometimes use. That is certainly bad, too. It's not only when we gossip or lie or curse our neighbour, either. Even worse than that, we dare to speak evil of those whom God loves. We fail to protect reputations or speak well of those who are kind to us, let alone those who are not.

Sickest of all, we even betray our friends and our families. Could anything be more self-destructive than a husband or wife speaking ill of a spouse? A parent speaking ill of a child? A child denigrating, insulting, and disrespecting a parent? Repent, for we have all done it.

The healing of the deaf-mute was accompanied by quite a bit of ceremony. It is, after all, what his friends asked for. They begged Our Lord to "**lay His hand on him.**" So He took the man aside, apart from his friends, put His fingers into His ears, spat and touched his tongue, looked and sighed to heaven, spoke the Aramaic word "Ephphatha," and it was done. The touching indicates what was broken, what was being restored and healed.

Looking to heaven, Jesus showed from where the healing came. The sighing indicated the sympathy and compassion Our Lord felt towards this sinner. Then He spoke. And it was done. He opened the man's ears and lips with a word. What's more... Jesus opened the man's heart.

But one ceremony in this whole scenario gets less attention than the others. Maybe we don't even notice it unless it's called to our attention, because it doesn't seem to really be part of the healing process. But it is.

Jesus took the man apart from his friends, and away from the crowd. The deaf-mute was, like all of us, a man of unclean lips. He dwelt among a people of unclean lips. His friends were dangerous. Birds of a feather flock together. We know a man by the company he keeps. Consider their conversations later: They delight in gossip and self-promotion—spreading news about Jesus even against His direct command not to tell anyone. See how raucous they are in their sin. See how their tongues are loosened; loosened against the intentions and directions of God.

You, too, must be pulled away from your friends, even away from your family, if necessary, to save you. "**He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me,**" Jesus said. "**He who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.**"

Now, it is not too bad to have to consider loving Jesus more than friends, perhaps not even all that bad to actually try doing it. And we may even be able to love Him more than father and mother. We can usually handle that okay.

But it is pretty tough to think of loving Him more than our children. And what about hating your children in order to love Jesus? Can you do that? Most of us can't. Repent of that, too, then. Love God above all else.

Since He has chosen you and brought you to faith, how successful are you going to be at choosing to follow Him; to remain in that faith? Do you think you can do it, alone?

Children sometimes play a game that goes like this: They imagine some super-villain has their family and friends in a fiendish trap, and they—the children—are trying to be the heroes saving them. Time or circumstances are such that they can only save one person. They'll spend hours trying to figure out which friend or family member they'd save, perhaps even dreaming up ways to sacrifice themselves so they can save two instead of just one, and so on. You know what I mean. You may have played this game yourself, way back when.

So imagine it this way: We sometimes place Jesus in the role of the villain. He says: "***You can either have Me or your child.***" Which will you choose? Will you save your baby from torture and send Jesus to the cross? Will you name him or her Barabbas?

The choice is only hypothetical, of course; unless, you are Abraham, with the knife in his hand, poised over his only son, Isaac. Or, unless you take the words of Our Lord to heart, and realise that He's serious... dead serious.

How can God be so cruel, so strict, so absolute? Does He really want us to cut off our hands, cut out our tongues, to be separated from our friends, to hate mother and father, wife and children? Yes. He does—if that's what it takes to remain faithful. Repent. Don't judge God. Don't decide for yourself what kind of a God He should be; what sort of instructions He should give. Who do you think you are?

And notice that all of these things have a spiritual dimension, not just a physical sense. Our Lord removed the deaf-mute from his friends, but then He gave him back to them. Cutting out our tongues might stop us from slandering out loud, but it would not stop sin. And it would render useless one of the gifts God has given us to use in His service. It would keep us from praising Him and proclaiming Him to others. God seeks the restoration and rehabilitation of all—not paralysis; not disfiguring.

He does not simply desire that you don't sin. He also wants good works for you, as St. James taught us today. He has work for you to do in His kingdom, things He has prepared for you. He has a use for that hand that once caused you to sin. He has a message for that tongue to proclaim... that tongue that once slandered and blasphemed.

This work includes prayer, confession, and praise, as well as the nurture and care and spiritual training of our children and the spreading of the Gospel to a world of wagging tongues and unclean lips. Just because we are prone to abuse the good things God gives does not mean that they are not good, or that God does not want us to have them. Do not cut off your hands or any other members, but commit them and put them to use in service to neighbour.

It was not only the deaf-mute who was changed. Jesus also changed the praying friends. They were all astonished beyond measure at what He had done. They had asked Him to do it, but when He did, they were still astonished. They were changed. So are all of you. God gave more than they asked, more than they imagined. He always does—for them, and for you.

He didn't merely remove the impediments to hearing and speech. He also removed the impediment to praise and confession. He changed the man's heart. He declared it clean. He took all its filth and guilt upon Himself. And out of the man's mouth, past his lips to make them clean, came the great "**Amen**" of faith. He had been touched by God, fingers in His ears, hands upon His tongue. He had been called out, but it had been for mercy's sake all along.

And the burning coal of Jesus' love, the mercy of that spit, was also touched to the unclean lips and tongues of the friends, and they were seared clean by faith. They were purified as well by the sacrifice and gift of God in the midst of His creation. He calls it back into order, removing the curse, gathering the Church like a hen gathers her chicks, opening hearts and ears to receive Him and loosening tongues to again sing His praise.

Thus He causes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak, the lame to walk and the blind to see. He places the solitary into families and brings the dead into life. All things He has done well, for He is good.

Hearing and speaking are metaphors of faith and of life, like seeing and believing, like eating and drinking. He does all these things for you, and all these things for free. Even though His ways are beyond our discovery or comprehension, He has made this love known to you. He loves you. He welcomes and is delighted by your prayers and your works. He gives you a family, here together in this house. Look around at your genuine brothers and sisters, all those here with the very same Father, all of us children born of Christ's bride, Mother Church. He gives you ears to hear and a tongue to praise.

All that you have; all that is you—your heart and mind and body and soul, and yes, even your tongue—have been washed in His Blood, and covered with His Name. For His sake, you are made good and pure. So, too, are the fruits of your lips and the sound of your praise—as is the love of your family and friends. You have been healed and restored. You have been touched by God with water and Spirit. You are a blood brother with God in ways beyond finding out.

So it is that He feeds you again this day—with His Word and in the grace and peace that passes all understanding. And who can be anything but astonished beyond measure? Thanks be to God; He does all things well.

Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Sermon read by Phillip Edwards, 5 September 2021

Reference

Accessed at: <https://www.stpaulaustin.org/sermons/a-tongue-loosened-for-what/>

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