

Homily on Mark 7:31-37

September 10, 2018

Intro: Deafness is a terrible affliction. I always thought that blindness was the worst handicap. But in the summer of 1972 Seattle U. had on campus a group of blind people and a group of deaf ones. I visited with both groups, and was astonished to hear the deaf ones say they envied the blind. Their reason was that the blind could hear what others said and could respond. They could communicate. I went away with a profound respect for the power of communication as the basis of community.

Today's gospel reinforces that conviction. The deaf man brought to Jesus was deaf from birth. Since he had never heard the sound of speech, he could not reproduce those sounds himself and so was mute. Perhaps because he was deaf, Jesus took him away from the noise of the crowd to cure him. He healed him by putting his finger in his ears and his spittle on his tongue. Then, as a sign of how hard was such a healing, Jesus looked up to his Father in heaven, and groaned. He groaned, "*Ephthatha*; Open up!" Miraculously, he immediately began to speak, the concrete sign that his deafness had been cured. Jesus has restored him to communication in his community. The crowd acknowledged the miraculous cure and found Jesus admirable.

The Meaning for us today: Most of us are not physically deaf, but we may be tone deaf---psychologically or spiritually deaf. This deafness helps us understand the sexual abuse crisis of the Church.

Bishops before 1985 often did the best they could not only for abusive priests but also for their congregations. They thought they were dealing with a psychological or moral problem. And so they sent priests to psychologists and psychiatrists, and to weeks of retreat. When these healers reported that the priest was reformed and would no longer abuse, they sent them to a new parish, apart from places of previous temptation. Often these bishops acted in good faith with the best knowledge of their time. Unfortunately many bishops did not act in such good faith.

But in their national meeting of 1986 the bishops were informed that psychiatrists had now classified pedophilia as an incurable defect; such men would sin again. Archbishop Hunthausen came home and immediately opened all the files on priestly abuse, and appointed a board of laymen (including lawyers and psychologists) to adjudicate the credibility of all reports. Those judged credible led to the laicization or exclusion from ministry of the guilty priests. A few were handed over to the courts and did jail time for their crimes. The Seattle procedure was copied by the Chicago Archdiocese and a few others, but most bishops did not take such action. They are culpably guilty for the crimes of their priests for the sixteen years between 1986 and 2002, when the US Bishops promulgated their *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. That charter's procedures have been largely effective. For example, the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report points out that of the 1000 cases of sexual abuse by priests and bishops, only two have occurred since that charter, and those two were appropriately addressed.

And yet as we try to understand compassionately the situation of the bishops we are still rightly outraged. The priests who abused were deaf to the unspoken protests of their victims, the bishops were deaf to the anguished reports of the children's parents, and Pope John Paul II was deaf to the few bishops who brought these crimes to his attention.

Why were they so deaf? That is the question that still needs to be answered.

We are all deaf. Husbands are deaf to their wives, parents are deaf to their children, our representatives are deaf to our concerns. In any crisis an institution tends to circle the wagons, protect the institution. We can see it in the police, in institutions like a university, in many professions. We want to protect our good name, to avoid scandal. We become deaf to the legitimate claims of wronged outsiders to know the truth and to

see consequences for bad behavior. The institution is held to be more important than the people it is supposed to serve.

Many of us believe the clerical culture of our hierarchy caused the deafness. From their seminary days priests were held to be different. They were educated in separate seminaries, often before they reached puberty. They were trained to put loyalty to the institutional church at the top of their priorities. They were rewarded for keeping the rules, by becoming monsignors or bishops. They saw the Church as the only vehicle of salvation and so the institution must be protected, at all costs. And so there was a fear of revealing to the public that we are also a sinful church, made up of sinners. Some of the abusive priests were wonderful pastors, skilled spiritual leaders, and so we closed our ears to the abuses that were recorded.

If that is the case, then we need to reorient our sense of the Church from an institution to a community of sinful people who find healing in the sacraments. To do that we need to be cured of our deafness. It is a terrible affliction and only Jesus can cure it. We need Jesus to put his finger in our ears and his spit in our mouth.

The Jesus who can do that is **you**. First, we need those who have been abused, or those who know of such abuse, to speak the truth to our Archbishop. The deaf mute in today's gospel speaks. Sometimes all that we need is to be heard, and know that we are heard. That is the experience the bishop wants us to have. We won't get beyond this crisis until all these nasty secrets have been exposed to the light. Second, we need to get beyond our passivity in this crisis. The church is not the hierarchy, but the People of God. We need to get Father and Bishop off their pedestals. We need pastors who stink like the sheep. And so we need to tell our Bishop what changes we need to make in the seminary education of our pastors. We need to keep pushing for reform of structures which put institution in place of the healing touch of Jesus, who loves sinners. We need you as Jesus to put your finger in the ears of our priests and bishops and to put your spit in our mouths. We need you, above all, to tell your stories.

That is why Deacon Henry last week told us that we need you, and we need you even though we know that you are sinners too and have your own spiritual deafness. That is why we are here at this Eucharist. We ask God to heal us, by transforming us into active members of Christ's own Body, which we receive here. We need to believe in the power that we receive here, through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**