

The words that we heard Jesus speak this morning to the deaf man are words that He speaks to us as well. Ephphatha – be opened! Allow the words of God to enter not just into your mind but also into your hearts. Ephphatha – allow your tongue to be loosed. Speak the good news of God, allow all of your words, all of your actions and all of your deeds to be affected by the words that are proclaimed here from Scripture. But it's difficult. It'd really difficult for us to be open to change, to be open to God's will, because it means us adapting, it means us not doing things the way we've always done them.

In fact, that's what St James is telling us today in our second reading. Show no partiality. Don't allow divisions to come up from the inside. But it's hard for us, as humans, to not judge a book by its cover. In fact, there's this story that I heard a few years ago that really speaks about this.

It's about this homeless man who was treated poorly outside of a church. And so, the new pastor of that church transformed himself into a homeless-looking man and went into his new church. A 10,000-member congregation. He was to be introduced as the new pastor that day. He walked around, and his church soon began to fill with people, about 30 minutes before church (They must not be Catholic – 30 minutes before church!)

But only 3 people out of the 10,000 people said hello to him. He asked people for change to buy food. No one in the church even looked at him. They looked through him, they looked past him.

So he went into the sanctuary to sit down in the front of the church. And he was asked by multiple ushers to sit in the back. He greeted people, but they began to give him dirty looks. They looked down on him.

He sat in the back of the church. He listened throughout the whole service. Listened to the announcements and when all was done the elders of the church went up and were excited to introduce the new pastor to the congregation. They said, "We would like to introduce to you our new pastor."

The congregation began to look around and were really excited and were clapping. And then this homeless man in the back stands up and began walking down the aisle. The clapping immediately stopped. People began to gawk at him, at his audacity – why would this man consider himself one of us?

But he got up and was walking down toward the microphone. Several people half got up to try and stop him, but they let him go. And he paused for a moment and he said, “The king will say to those on His right, come you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

At this the congregation was in shock. They still didn't quite realize what was going on. And so eventually he said, “By the way, I'm your new pastor.” The congregation was in shock because of two things: one, how dare someone dress themselves like a homeless person, and two, now we have a homeless person as our pastor?

The congregation began to divide. The next week, only half of the members came back to church. Some didn't come back because they thought that, well, I'm obviously not good enough to come here, and the others came back in shame and in guilt, saying, “How do I treat others in ways that I would not want to be treated? When I'm down, how do I want to be treated? When I don't have the opportunity to shower, I don't have the opportunity to do whatever before I come to this congregation? Do I want to be treated the same way that we all treated our new pastor?” They learned a lesson from this man.

Sometimes we learn good lessons and sometimes we don't quite get the lessons. But at the end of the day, what we're called to do is to love Christ who resides in our brother and sister.

This last week I had the fortune to teach sophomore theology. we talked about one of the Vatican documents, *Gaudium et Spes*. And we were talking specifically about the dignity of the human person.

And some of the questions that they came up were some of the same questions that some of us struggle with. Where does our dignity come from? Because the world tells our dignity comes from how much we have and how much we do. It's a lie. Our dignity comes from God, because He creates us in His image and likeness. Do we really believe that? Or are these just words that we spout off? We think about it for about five minutes and then when we're out the door, the first person that cuts us off – we flip them the bird. Maybe not physically, but mentally we do.

God is calling us each to recognize Him in all of His creation, no matter how rich you are, no matter how poor you are, no matter how well taken care of, no matter how well put together or not well put together or well taken care of. We can't define ourselves, my brothers and sisters by external features or even by our internal features! We have to begin to define ourselves so that we can see in others that God loves us we have to define ourselves by that.

There's one thing they say in homiletics: never use the word "must." But my brothers and sisters, if we want the world to change, we MUST see Christ present in one another. It's a non-negotiable. Because when we're talking about the dignity of the human person, they began to realize, these 15- and 16-year olds, that if you can diminish someone's dignity, you can justify anything because they don't have the same rights and value as you.

We talked about Nazi Germany. And we said, that's what Hitler did to the Jewish people. He looked at them and said, these people are not as human as you and I. They have no rights, they have no value, worth or dignity, just kill them.

We look at that and think, oh my gosh, how could anyone ever think that? And then we do the same things in our own lives when we see the homeless person on the street and we look past them. "Well if I

give them money all they're going to do is use it on drugs or alcohol, I don't want to aid that."

I'm not saying you have to stop at every person and give them anything, but the least we can give is a prayer. The least we can do is to pray for them. I was reminded in that same class, that every time we pray the Our Father, many of us condemn ourselves. Because we pray "forgive us our trespasses **as we forgive those who trespass against us.**"

So if we don't have forgiveness in our hearts, we're telling God to use the same measure of forgiveness on me that I use on others. If I don't forgive others, don't forgive me my own transgressions. Think about that when we pray the Our Father today. What unforgiveness do we have in our hearts?

Jesus tells us that if you come to the altar with unforgiveness in your heart, leave at that moment, go offer your forgiveness, and then come back. Because we are not called to receive unworthily. And unforgiveness can cause us to do so.

So Ephphatha. Allow your ears to be opened. Allow this word to begin to convert our hearts. Each and everyone of us struggles with forgiveness at times. No one likes to forgive the people that pick on them. But that's what we're called to. To love our enemies. To allow our ears not to just listen, but to truly hear what God is saying to us. The challenge that he's calling us to. So that once our hearts are converted in His word, in His love, in His grace, in His mercy, then by the Grace of God, may our tongues be loosened. May our words be as sharp as the sharpest sword, cutting evil down, and not cutting each other down. Bringing about love, bringing about peace. So Ephphatha. May our ears be opened, and our tongues be loosed.