

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 9, 2018

The story of the healing in this gospel is very intriguing in its graphic detail. Jesus takes the man aside – puts his finger in his ears - spits and touches the man's tongue – groans as he looks up to heaven. Then he says EPHPHATHA, which, Mark says, means "Be opened."

Can you recall the first time you heard the word, EPHPHATHA? If you have attended a baptism you have probably heard it. In the rite of Baptism, following the actual baptism in water, the anointing with oil, the bestowing of the white garment and the lighted candle, the Ephphata or Prayer over Ears and Mouth follows. The minister of the sacrament prays thus:

"The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God."

So what happened? Why do we stumble around trying to receive the word of God and proclaim it in our lives? I would suggest that we have all amassed some wax in our ears since baptism and don't hear well. This wax is the culture we live in which drowns out the word of God.

Listen to these words of Walter Brueggemann:

"The crisis in the American church has almost nothing to do with being liberal or conservative; it has everything to do with giving up on the faith and discipline of our Christian baptism and settling for a common generic American identity that is part patriotism, part consumerism, part violence, and part affluence."

That sounds like an Old Testament prophet, doesn't it? Actually, Brueggemann is a Protestant Old Testament scholar whose book, "The Prophetic Imagination" is a classic on the prophets.

Patriotism – consumerism – violence – affluence. Surely he must be speaking about other Christians, not us Catholics!

I won't try to explain or defend his statement. Rather I prefer to try to share my own experience.

I grew up in a Catholic sub-culture; call it a ghetto if you wish. I had Protestant friends but our life was centered in the Catholic parish – religion, education, culture, social events, athletics. It all hung together. The reality of God in our midst was felt and taken for granted.

This is all gone now. Catholics have been absorbed into the main culture. We live in a secular state. This isn't all bad. There is more tolerance, understanding of differences and a willingness to live and work with others who are different. We live now with what has been called a self-sufficient humanism. It is now believed by most people that we are essentially adequate to face the problems of life. There is only what we see and that's all – that is enough. We don't need help from another

world. There is no need for God in such a worldview. And even less for a church. All this works well enough until the wall of self-sufficiency is breached in some tragedy or some overwhelming event that lays bare the illusion and immaturity of soul.

The current crisis in the Catholic Church will now send many away. Or it will make us open ourselves to a deeper reality and a stronger faith. Over fifty years have passed since the Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, predicted that the Christian of the future will be a mystic or not a Christian at all. I believe we have reached that point. Following Christ and seeking God now takes more than cultural Catholicism. It requires an inner, spiritual life, a mystical life in God.

What would this look like?

- The Mystic knows that God cannot be known but that God can be and is experienced in the ordinary events of life.
- The Mystic sees, in God, the unity of all reality. There is no "us and them," black or white, Christian or Jew, gay or straight. We are all one in God.
- The Mystic knows that God is still creating and is at the heart of all the material cosmos. We touch God in the things of the earth.
- Likewise the Mystic trusts the sensual and, with reverence and awe, honors art, music, the body, sexuality and all that we touch and feel.
- The Mystic, in coming closer to what God really is, will experience times of desert, emptiness, darkness, as the self-centered ego is surrendered for the love of God to embrace us in the depths of all that exists.
- The Mystic, in knowing he/she is one with all, feels the pain of anyone who suffers, the earth that is polluted, the poor who are exploited.
- Mysticism finally is the path to radical transformation and freedom as Jesus tried to tell us.

To sustain such a mystical life requires we belong to a community, and share with others who are saints and sinners. As Catholics we gather around the Eucharistic table because this is the sign of God's presence to us, present all the time and everywhere. The Mass is a mystical event in which Christ transcends time and place to be with us, to feed us, to be one with us that we might be one with him and others. Around this table we are joined to all believers of all times and places, living and deceased, with the angels and saints, in an act of adoration of the one great mystery which is God.

We live in confusing times and the institutional church has let us down. It is time to take the wax out of our ears and open ourselves to hear the word of God in prayer and community, in how we live our daily lives. Ephphata, be opened!

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