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Pentecost 16

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“O Lord, Ephphatha Us!”

Text: Mark 7:31-37 (James 2:1-10, 14-18; Isaiah 35:4-7a)

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

Did you ever wonder how Jesus could see and hear so much better than us? And I don't mean just that He didn't need glasses or hearing aids. How could Jesus see the needs of others better than we? How could Jesus hear the cries of the poor and needy better than we? How could Jesus have compassion so much better than we?

I think the answer we often give, how we often think, is that it's because He's God. And so as God, He will be and just be able to do things we will never be able to be and do.

Well, yes. And no.

The Bible is clear that Jesus is God. True God, as we confessed once again in the Creed this morning: *God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God.*

But He is the true God in human flesh. Incarnate. Or to use the words of the Creed we spoke this morning again: *who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man.* And Jesus is a man, a human being, the Scriptures say, who is just like us in every way. He isn't some new kind of super-being, half-man, half-god; some kind of science fiction type of being. He is the 100% true God and a 100% true man in one person. Or as the Athanasian Creed says: *perfect God and perfect man.*

And that, in fact, is the only distinction between Jesus' manhood and ours - He is in every way just like us, *except* without sin. Jesus is *perfect* man.

And that, I think, is the reason why He could see what we cannot see, and hear what we cannot hear, and feel what we cannot feel - not just because He was God. For although that's true, an important point in theology is that although He is God, Jesus willingly didn't use His power as God for Himself. He always had that power, as we heard today. He healed a man who was deaf, and you and I cannot do that. So He always had that power. But He didn't use it for Himself. For although He could heal, He also got hungry. He also got tired. He wept. He didn't teleport Himself or zap Himself to where He wanted to go, He walked. So He really is a true man just like you and me in every way,

except without sin.

And I think that's important and what I want to think about a little today. Because if Jesus could see and hear and feel better than we simply because He's God, then these are things I will never be able to do. These are God things, so, oh well, why bother? Why try?

But if Jesus can see and hear and feel better than we not because He's God but because He's a true and perfect-without-sin MAN, then we see how we who are born with sin aren't what we should be. How sin has infected us and effected us far more than we realize. That it is the sin in us that makes us blind to the needs of others. It is the sin in us that makes us deaf to the cries for help of the poor and needy. It is the sin in us that when we do see and hear them and their cries, we are . . . sometimes? oftentimes? . . . so cold and heartless and uncompassionate toward them - looking away, pretending not to see, assuming something bad about them. That's not an excuse, to let us off the hook; but the reality of who we are.

And so Jesus is not what we can never be - *He is what we used to be!* Before sin entered the world and brought us down into the depths of sin and death, corrupting our bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits.

And this sin has not just effected our relationships with each other, but with God, too. We have become blind to His working, deaf to His Word, and so utterly confused about His love and compassion for us. Not understanding His Word. Not realizing what love really is and what His love is really all about.

And so what I've taken a really long time here to say is this: that deaf man in the story today? That's not just a cool story. **That's us.**

And that's why - if you were here for the Sunday School opening today, when we sang Matins together - that's why we sang the words from the psalmist that says: *O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise.* And it's why we need to pray in the same way: O Lord, ***ephphatha*** me! O Lord, open my eyes, that I may see the needs of others. O Lord, open my ears, that I may hear their cries for help. O Lord, open my heart, that I may be compassionate.

But this, too: O Lord, ***ephphatha*** my eyes, that I may see my sin. O Lord, open my ears, that I may hear the truth of Your Word. O Lord, open my mouth, that I confess my sin.

And then this, too: O Lord, ***ephphatha*** my ears to hear Your Word of forgiveness. O Lord, open my eyes to see You on the cross where my sin was atoned for and my death was put to death. O Lord, open my heart to believe that You did all this for me. And then open my mouth to declare Your forgiveness to others - both speak of the forgiveness I have received, and also to forgive those who sin against me.

And then how great would it be for what we heard at the end of the story in the Holy Gospel to be true today - that we could not stop talking about Jesus. That it would be said of us: those Christians won't stop talking about Jesus and all that He has done for them!

This is what Isaiah said would happen when God comes. When God comes, Isaiah said, with *vengeance* and *recompense* - pay back! Not against you, but to *save you*. Not against you, but against sin and all the way it has ravaged us. God is on your side.

But sometimes it doesn't seem like it, does it? It seems as if the God who in Jesus saw and heard and had compassion isn't that God anymore. We pray and it seems as if God is deaf to us. We pray and it seems like nothing happens. It seemed that way to David sometimes too, and led him to write what we sang today in the Introit: *O Lord, be not deaf to me. Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy.*

But then he also writes: *Blessed be the Lord! For He has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy.* What we sometimes think or feel isn't the reality. Yes, He hears. The God we know in Jesus is still our God. He has not changed. He hears.

And He speaks. God is not silent either. The God who spoke *ephphatha* to the deaf man, opened His ears, and loosed His tongue, is the God who speaks to us still today. Not in a booming voice from heaven or words that we hear when we're lying on our beds at night. More reliable and consistent words than those.

He speaks to us here and says: *I forgive you all your sins.* And they really are. Because Jesus told those He sends out to speak these words: *He who hears you hears me* (Luke 10:16). And while *in many and various ways God spoke to His people of old by the prophets, He now in these last days has spoken to us by His Son* (Hebrews 1:1-2a). And we have those words. The Scriptures. And the preaching of them. Telling us who our Lord is and all that He has done for us and for our salvation. And teaching us who we are - who we once were, who we are now, **and who we will be again.**

Who we will be when sin is finally and fully removed from us. That will be in the resurrection. But started now. Started now by the Holy Spirit given you in your baptism. The Holy Spirit whose job is to make you holy. And by the words of absolution cleansing your hearts. And by the Body and Blood of Jesus placed into your mouths here at the altar. All this to make you again what you once were. To conform you to the image of the Son, of Jesus. That you begin to be like Him. On this side of the grave and eternity, you won't be perfect man as He was. But you will begin to be like Him. To see as He saw. To hear as He hear. To have compassion as He did. And maybe even laying down your life for others as He did. Not because you have to; because it's a rule. And not to save yourself; Jesus already did that. But because that's *who you now are*, in Him. Because you are a son of God, too.

No matter who you are. For as we heard from James today, God shows no partiality. Jesus died for the sins of every person. From the guy who sleeps under the bridge at night to the guy who sleeps in the White House at night. From the woman who makes millions to the one who works at Chik-Fil-A. From the one who lives in the 21st century to the one who lived before Jesus was born. From the eskimo to the aborigine to the barbarian to the anglo-saxon. Makes no difference. *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus* (Romans 3:23b-24).

That's how you know Jesus is for you, and what He has done is for you. If the Word of God said *some* people or even *most* people but not *all* people, then you couldn't be sure which group you fell into - that this word is for you. But it says all people. And so that's you. Jesus died for you. His forgiveness is for you. His life and salvation is for you. His Baptism and Supper are for you. And through all these He *ephphathas* you. And most importantly, *ephphathas the grave* for you. That won't be your end. For his life is for you, too.

And that you have received. Now. That you see and hear and speak. Now. That though you are not what you once were, you be again. Even now. In Jesus. The Word made flesh. For you. The Word who speaks for you and to you. The Word who ephphathas you. Now. And you are.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.