

“Our Savior Jesus Who Heals” (Mark 7:31-37)

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 6th, 2015

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. I love this morning's bulletin cover. The Lord Jesus, our Savior, our King, stops to minister to the man brought to him – deaf and with a speech impediment – Jesus gives this man His full and undivided attention. Jesus cares. He loves. In the art work, He bends and reaches out and is in the process of touching the man with His hand. This is a powerful picture; an inspirational picture and while it is a form of art on our Concordia Publishing House paper bulletin, it depicts truth about the One we follow Who is also *our* Healer.

But we struggle with this subject matter of healing and we do so in many ways:

1. We can easily water-down the many accounts in the gospels of Jesus graciously giving physical healing. We hear time and time again that this was done for a historical purpose: to clearly establish His identity as the Savior, to point people to Himself. And while there are elements of truth to this, the implication is that Jesus is no longer in the healing business. So we expect nothing from Him when we are in need of healing. When this happens we experience what the Scriptures warn about: “You do not have, because you do not ask.” (James 4:2)
2. We are also easily turned off by the flamboyant “faith healers” who – frankly – perpetuate false teaching which includes:
 - a. We should fully expect to be physically healed when we have sufficient faith in Jesus Christ.
 - b. Furthermore -- the wrong ideas continue -- healing must occur in the same miraculous fashion as in the first-century ministry of Jesus Christ, that is, by spontaneous remission (by the way – we are not saying that God can't choose to do this in 2015...He most certainly can – but the problem is that to *insist* that our experience *must* be spontaneous discounts many other extensions of the Lord's healing made available to us today, and also discounts the total view of healing in Scripture which can never be reduced to physical healing only).
 - c. And finally – as far as the ideas from the “faith healers” (and this is a corollary to the first point) – we are presented the idea that failure to be physically healed is because of lack of faith in God or disobedience to His Word. (see Ludwig, *Order Restored*, 179)
3. We also struggle with the matter of healing on account of the popular fatalism that exists in the church: the idea that God *wants* His children to be sick so as to imply that the body – which is treated as less important than the soul – when it suffers, puts the soul in a position to prosper. As Ludwig points out, however:

“Such an attitude is not even remotely close to voluntarily accepting a cross and bearing it to God’s glory [as is taught for example in Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’ account in 2nd Corinthians 12]. To believe that God *wants* us to be sick is an attitude of resignation, a pessimistic fatalism that one’s lot in life is to be sick if sickness occurs for whatever reason. Is it not significant that not once does the idea of God willing our sicknesses appear in the record of the Gospels?” (Ibid., 187)

4. And finally, there is confusion about healing because there are other types of healings that take place -- though the Lord permits even these -- still these things confuse people about healing in general. In many cases when healing takes place driven by emotion or other forces we should never try to access, there is no thought or acknowledgment of the Lord of Life. In some cases these other types of healings rely on other powers altogether which blatantly deny the Lord. On the more innocuous side of things, some of these forms of “healing” are quite simply the results of positive thinking. Other forms, however, are sinister and can go so far as investing in what is evil and idolatrous. To give you an example of the more innocuous type: right now in the world of professional tennis the U.S. Open is being played in New York. There is a young dynamic American tennis player named Victoria Duval who was diagnosed with cancer. She testifies to the power of her positive thinking. Every, single day after her diagnosis, she repeated to herself, “I’m not sick, I’m not sick, I’m not sick.” She has in fact had a remission and was back at this year’s U.S. Open.

No one denies that positive thinking can and does contribute to physical health (though again, any healing – even those that are not attributed to the Lord – still come from Him since in Him we live and move and have our being [Acts 17]). But certainly we learn something practical from Miss Duval: it is important how we treat ourselves psychologically as well as physically. We can choose to make healthy choices in the realm of our emotions, our diet, our exercise, and the very thoughts and visual images we strive to have predominate what is in our minds.

But here’s the thing: with all of these considerations...all of these grandiose attempts to control God (the faith healer); the faithless intellectualism which confines exceptional healing to the first century (the skeptics); those who forget the Lord of glory altogether (the humanists), what so often gets lost is the core cause of all of our disease, illness, and sickness: sin and the enemy.

During my research for today’s sermon I was struck by the boldness of Luther’s commentary on our Gospel today from Mark 7:31-37:

“For that this poor man is hurt in this manner that he can use neither tongue nor ears, like other people, those are blows and thrusts of the accursed devil...we Christians should deem

such defects and infirmities nothing else but blows of the devil, he causes such distress on earth and does damage where he can.”

“He refers especially to these two members, ears and tongue; for the kingdom of Christ is based upon the Word, which cannot otherwise be grasped or understood but through these two members, ears and tongue, and it reigns only through the Word and faith in the hearts of men. The ears take hold of the Word, and the heart believes it; but the tongue speaks and confesses, as the heart believes. Therefore if the tongue and the ears are removed, there is no noticeable difference between the kingdom of Christ and the world...” (Harold H. Buls, *Exegetical Notes, Gospel Texts: Series B Mark-John The Season After Pentecost*, CTS Press, Fort Wayne, IN: 61. Buls quotes Kretzmann who quotes Luther)

And this should convict us, because we have gone along with disease and sickness as all kinds of things other than what these things are at the core: the blows and thrusts of the devil. But remember I have brought out not only physical ailments, but emotional and behavioral ones as well. You might be tempted if you have no physical ailments to believe that this sermon has no application to you. If so, you’re wrong. What do you do with your ears and with your tongue? What do you fill your ears with? What do you listen to? What are you putting into your mind? Remember the blows of Satan...his blows are designed to keep the Word of God out of your ears. He hates the Word of Christ. He does not want you to hear it. And what of your tongue? What do you speak? What do you confess? He wants you to degrade, to gossip, to complain, to curse, to swear, to lie...and he does not want you to confess the Name above all Names, the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. I do not now speak as a salesman dangling a stupid talisman, but this is true: the more you -- in true faith -- physically and audibly call on the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the better. This is nothing novel...the blind, and the leprous, and the desperate in Scripture needed help and needed healing, they cried out – their excellent and holy example is put before us in the Word – “Lord have mercy!” “Jesus, help me!” These words when spoken in faith are powerful. When sin, the world, and the evil one want to close your lips and keep you...silent...tell them to take a hike and rather be like the Psalmist in Psalm 51:15: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.”

And young men (and even older men) get over your coolness about singing and chanting. There are ignorant caricatures about singing. It is often perceived as strictly in the realm of the feminine. Maybe your mother sang lullabies to you as a child for example. Great, but don’t carry that over into the Gospel. The Gospel is Good News in the context of war. It is a battle cry heralding that the enemy has been defeated, that the enemy will not – after all – come over the hill and wipe out your village. You get to live, the victory has been won. It is the cry of the soldier. Men are called to be strong...men open their lips and call out, cry out. And as your pastor I don’t care whether you can necessarily carry a tune. Do you think the Lord cares? Sing...proclaim...confess...be a warrior, open your mouths, open your lips...confess the victory

in Christ your Savior. Men do this and our hymns are intended to be sung, not by the weak but by the strong as is recorded in Joel 3:10: "let the weak say, 'I am a warrior.'"

It's funny that men are taught to use their voices in a powerful way as football players and in the military, but then they get this silly idea that when they walk into a church they should be like mice! Enough of that! Our voices (our tongues) and our ears belong to the LORD! We shall use them to His glory!

So we come with all of our diseases, our illnesses, our sicknesses, with our being self-conscious, afraid, apathetic...we come with all of our physical and emotional maladies...we come as sinners, and all of us are in desperate need, just like the man deaf and with the speech impediment. But consider what our Gospel from Mark 7 presents:

Jesus conducted six actions:

1. First Jesus took the man apart from the multitude by himself.
2. Then He placed His fingers into the afflicted man's ears.
3. Thirdly, Jesus spit. We are not told where he spit.
4. Jesus touched the man's tongue.
5. Jesus looked up to heaven.
6. Sixth, He sighed.

What was happening? First of all, our Lord's action to take the man aside by himself is already indicative of the good news for you and me. As you know there are billions of people on planet earth...it is easy to think that we are nothing, insignificant, unimportant, and unnoticed. Not so. The Lord Jesus is able and wants to take you aside – all by yourself – to pour out His compassion, His love, and His help in time of need. He does! When you come forward to receive the Holy Sacrament, yes, it is with the Body of Christ/The Church and you are not alone (indeed you receive Christ with all the Communion of Saints present), but also, *you...the individual you, the singular you are personally served by the Lord of glory...He takes you aside and attends to YOU!*

In the Gospel He placed His fingers into the man's ears and then touched the man's tongue. To this day, Jesus touches you. His very body is put into your mouth; His very Word is put into your ears. God touches you to heal you. God touches you to heal you. God touches you to heal you. He forgives your sins. You are healed. He gives you eternal life. You are healed. He promises to provide for your every need on this earth. You are healed. And He invites you to ask Him for more.

We should because we are already recipients of the saving, healing Gospel, we are children of God. I love the way Ludwig was so free and so bold in writing about the attitude we should have:

“In times of sickness...[we] supplicate the God of grace to be *released* of disease and suffering and to be made whole. Here we see faith as asking, pleading, beseeching, begging, and appealing to God for mercy. This is a common usage of faith and one that occupies many of the narratives of the Old and New Testaments. The volitional element of faith is illustrated by *tenacity*, an attitude that refuses to give up despite the barriers that one faces...We should never give up if our request is in accord with the will of God and is for a just cause. We are encouraged to pray that God's goodness and wholeness will be revealed in our lives. Praying is an act of faith. As Jesus makes clear at the conclusion of [one] parable, ‘And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night?’” (Ludwig, 175)

Jesus spit. This catches us off guard and we have a hard time relating to this in the 21st century. There is, however, very good reason for this.

James Voelz points out that according to the Talmud, human spittle was seen as a healing agent. (Voelz, James W., Concordia Commentary: Mark 1:1-8:26, Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013, 488). This would therefore be a sign to the man that he would be healed by Jesus. The man with his background would understand that Jesus was speaking to him in a form of sign language. Jesus spit. Jesus was telling that man, “I am going to heal you.” There would be no doubt in the man’s mind as to who was healing him! Jesus would heal him! He said He would and then He did! Jesus doesn’t need to use sign language to say this to you Christian: “I am the One who heals you!” You know this, because He has given you His Word!

And He looked up to heaven to teach us again from where your healing comes...this is the Christ who is the Son of God from heaven who took on our flesh; and He glorifies our Father in heaven. He does not call for strength by looking up, but rather affirms His identity: our Savior from heaven! And then He proclaims “Ephphatha!” an Aramaic imperative that means “Be opened!” This Gospel imperative He has spoken to you: Be opened – you who are loved by God – have your ears opened to hear the Gospel; have your tongue opened to receive the body and blood of Jesus; have your spirit opened to receive total forgiveness; have your life opened to receive the Holy Spirit; have your new identity opened to be in Christ...be opened! Be healed! Receive the endless blessings of your God of mercy and love! Be opened! Be healed!

And He sighed. He sighed to again express His compassion -- He began in compassion, He ends in compassion -- because He knew and He knows why we suffer: the enemy has attacked. He sighs for us because He is full of love so that we would be released from the havoc of the evil one. His heart goes out to us and He takes action. He took action through His life lived for you; through His death that covered your sins with His blood, through His resurrection

which conquered death...He takes action now through His putting His Word and Sacrament into you; touching you to this day and proclaiming His healing upon you: Be opened!