

This morning's Gospel text is one of the great healing miracles of Jesus, and one unique to St. Mark's Gospel. Yet it's more than just a healing. This text is actually a wonderful example of evangelism.

It might not look like it at first glance, but in this account we're shown what is offered in evangelism, what has the power in evangelism, and what must be the focus of evangelism. And the answer to all of these is simple: the word of God. The word is and must be the center of the Church's efforts to "make disciples of all nations," as our Lord directs us.

So where do we see evangelism in this text? The second verse, where we read, "And they brought to Jesus a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged Him to lay His hand on him." This is the most basic act of evangelism: bringing someone to Jesus. As these people brought this man to Jesus, when we evangelize, we bring people to Jesus.

So first off, why do we bring people to Jesus? Well, why did the people bring the man to Jesus? Though the text doesn't come right out and say it, they've clearly brought the man to Jesus so that Jesus might heal him. This man is afflicted with serious problems: he can't hear, and he can't speak clearly. His ability to interact with the people around him is severely limited.

No doubt his friends and family could perhaps communicate some things through simple signs, but back then, as far as we know, there wasn't a standardized sign language like we have today. You were limited to more basic, intuitive signs, such as, say, putting fingers in one's ears or touching one's tongue to show what was going to be affected. And there's no guarantee that this guy could read and write.

So his family and friends couldn't tell him how their day went, or share a story about something they saw at the market that day. He couldn't enjoy the beauty of music, or the song of the birds. He couldn't hear the Scriptures being read in the synagogue, God's promises of deliverance and restoration.

This man was broken by sin, and in need of restoration that only God could give. That's why they bring Him to Jesus.

This restoration is why we bring people to Jesus. We are in a world broken by sin. Its effects touch every part of our lives. Creation bears thorns and thistles, endures droughts and blizzards and fires, rusts and rots and decays, because of sin.

Our bodies get sick and injured and break down because of sin. Our souls are attacked by anxiety and anger and impatience and lust and greed and a host of other temptations to sin because of our inborn, original sin. Our relationships, both between our fellow man and between ourselves and God, are marked by mistrust and dishonesty and outright hostility.

There is nothing about our lives that is not afflicted by sin.

And what's more, we are incapable of fixing these things with certainty, or in any way that is guaranteed to last. You can pull all the thorns and thistles out of your garden, but you know what? More will be there to take their place in a couple days.

You can take great care of your body and still have problems come out of nowhere, or go to the doctor to get one thing fixed and a week later a different part is hurting you.

You can tell yourself that you aren't going to get angry or practice greed or spread gossip about someone, but apart from the working of the Holy Spirit, those resolutions will fail, no matter how many self-help books you read.

You can try to patch up relationships with others, but you'll never do so perfectly, and sometimes they won't want to listen to you regardless. Or in the case of man's relationship to God, you are literally unable to fix it on your own, because there is nothing that you can do to take away sin. Once you've committed it, it's there unless He removes it.

All of this taken together, the thing that really needs restored by God is hope for the future. The deaf mute man had no hope – no mere man could cure such things – until they brought him to Jesus. People are afflicted with sin in so many ways, and there is no certain hope that anything will get better, until they are brought to Jesus.

So that's why we bring people to Jesus. But how will Jesus work? And can we know that He will? It's not just with wishful thinking that people bring the deaf mute man to Jesus. They have heard the word about what the word of Jesus can do.

Earlier in Jesus' ministry, He had freed a man from demonic oppression. And this wasn't just any ordinary demon-possessed man, as if there is such a thing. This was a man who ran naked through the graves, crying out and cutting himself with sharp stones. This was a man with demonic strength, who could shred ropes and break chains. This was a man who had so many demons inside himself that the demons called themselves "Legion," because there were so many.

But Jesus, by the power of His word, commanded the demons to leave, sending them into a herd of pigs, and the man was restored to his right mind. Though He had wanted to follow Jesus, the Lord sent him back home, to the region of the Decapolis, to proclaim what He had done for him. And so this former demoniac, whom everyone had feared, went through the region where the deaf mute man lived, proclaiming the word of Jesus.

It was very likely this word that the friends of this deaf mute man had heard that caused them to bring him to Jesus. If Jesus had the power to drive out even a legion of demons, surely He could restore a man's hearing and speech.

They don't know exactly how Jesus will do this – they ask that He lay His hands on the man, which isn't how Jesus actually ends up restoring him. But they believe that Jesus will help, that He can do what man cannot.

And Jesus does act to restore the man. He puts His fingers in the man's ears and touches the man's tongue, likely to give the man an idea of what He was about to do. Then came this: "And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, 'Be opened.' And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly."

Jesus, the Son of God, spoke His word to this man who had been brought to Him, and immediately that word was fulfilled. For man, this clearly would have been impossible. The man was deaf; what good could speaking anything to him do? We even express this in our common phrase when we say that someone's plea or request "falls on deaf ears." But whereas for man that indicates that something is hopeless, even deaf ears hear the voice of God and conform to it. Jesus tells the man "Be opened," and immediately His ears are opened.

But the word of God doesn't stop there. Not only are the man's ears opened, but his tongue is loosed as well. He starts speaking clearly, God's almighty power having restored his tongue and instantly teaching his mind how to speak rightly, despite never having heard clear speech for him to learn from.

They bring this man to Jesus, and through the word of Jesus, he is restored in ways even better than they might have hoped for. He can hear the crowds, the sounds of the wind through the grass, the birds singing in the distance. He'll be able to loudly and clearly greet his family and friends when he gets home, and he'll be able to hear their surprised exclamations and joyful thanksgivings. And he'll be able to hear the word of God, the Holy Scriptures, read in the synagogue, and to join in the prayers, Psalms, and songs of praise to the Lord. His life is restored, as only the word of God can restore.

This is true of those whom we bring to hear the word of Jesus. Their lives may look like complete wrecks, or they might seem to have it all together. But they all need the restoration that only Jesus has the power to give through His word.

As we heard last week from Ephesians 2, all men are born dead in sin, spiritually rotting away, headed toward the eternal grave. But God, through His word, grants life. By His word, He declares sins forgiven, that they've been paid for by His own blood.

He washes us and gives us new life in Holy Baptism, which is water joined to His word. That word declares that this act is done in the name – in the authority, in the power – of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Those aren't just empty words or mere labels. In and through them, God makes the water a life-giving water, rich in grace, that restores souls and cleanses hearts.

By His word, God puts His name on us, making us a part of His eternal family. He reconciles us to Himself, so that He is not an angry god far off or one demanding that we do enough to satisfy His demands. No, He makes us His dear children, and He becomes our loving Father, and Christ, the Son of God, our brother. When we bring people to hear the word of Jesus, we are bringing them to have God's own love and peace and life restored to them.

And what's more, this restoration is something that, while lasting into eternity, also takes place here and now. We heard this last week from Ephesians as well. Not only will we witness the immeasurable riches in the age to come, but right now we are exalted with Christ and seated in the heavenly places.

When God works through His word to give saving faith and restoration of eternal life, that all starts now. Right now, God is your Father. Right now, the Lord of the universe is watching over you, protecting you, providing for you. Right now, the King of Kings is ruling over all things, causing them

to bring about the good of His people here on earth. We know this because He tells it to us in His unbreakable word.

When we bring people to hear the words of Jesus, it's not just words about prospective blessings that only unfold after you die. Right now, the word blesses those who hear it. This doesn't mean that those who hear and believe will have easier, happier, more comfortable lives than those who don't. In fact, the opposite is more likely.

Yet God offers restoration in this life that is much greater and deeper than mere physical pleasure. He offers purpose to those adrift and looking for meaning. He offers comfort and stability to those whose lives are filled with uncertainty. He offers love to those who have been abandoned and forsaken by this world.

When we bring people to hear God's word, He offers restoration of what really matters, both in this life and in the life to come.

Because this is all God's power, working through His word, we can evangelize and not worry about how exactly it all works. The people who brought the deaf and mute man to Jesus didn't know how Jesus was going to heal him. They simply knew that Jesus had healed others and that He could heal their friend as well.

When we bring people to hear the word of God, when we share the Good News with them, we don't have to worry about knowing exactly how God will work. We don't need to know exactly what Bible verse would be most effective, or what exact sermon they would need to hear to bring them to faith. The working of the word isn't based on our understanding; it's based on God's power. God is the one who works. We are just instruments in His hands.

So the word tells what is needed in evangelism. And the word has the power to do what's needed in evangelism. For these reasons, then, the word must be at the center of our evangelism.

We can be tempted to think that other things, usually worldly things, will be what bring people to faith. Our focus can go away from what God offers to what our passions desire. We see this in the crowd from the reading.

After the man is healed, Jesus commands the people to not tell of the miracle. Why? Well, where is their focus? They show it when they say, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Now it's true enough that Jesus does all things well; He's God, after all. Yet their praises reveal that they think this physical restoration is the peak of Jesus' work. "He *even* makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." Surely nothing can be greater than this! They are focusing on His restoration, but they are limiting it to the things of this world. Physical hearing. Physical speech. Nothing about hearing God's promises and believing them, or speaking the words which grant life everlasting.

Jesus is a fantastic healer, but the Messiah, the Christ of God? Not so much. If they believed that, they would hear and obey His word, not defy Him and think that they know what's best.

In evangelism, we're tempted to look to the worldly, physical blessings as what matters. "If you become a Christian, your life will go better." "If you love Jesus, your relationships with your family

and friends will be fixed.” “If you come to our church, you’ll have fun and really enjoy your Sunday mornings again.”

Now often our Lord does grant blessings in this life to His people. He does grant times of refreshment and rest. He does repair relationships between Christians who are repentant and seek to reflect His love. He does offer true joy in the Divine Service as His Spirit opens our hearts and lets us grasp the reality of what great gifts are actually offered here.

But sometimes He also sends times of hardship and suffering. Sometimes His truth is a sword that brings division. And sometimes the conviction that He sends when we hear His word makes church somewhere we’d rather not be. The things of this life, and our human feelings and responses, are ever-changing. And that’s why we don’t evangelize based on them.

No, instead we stick to His holy word, front and center. As humans, we can’t guarantee what will happen to someone tomorrow, whether it will be better or worse than today. But God’s word promises that eternal peace and joy await those who believe and are baptized.

We can’t control what other people will think of us for being Christians. But we do know that our Lord, in His word, declares to us that He loves us and even gave His very life for us. And His love is unchanging, lasting into the ages.

We can’t guarantee that someone will love what they hear when God’s word is preached. And in fact, if we try to make it that way so that everyone’s happy and no one gets offended, then we aren’t presenting the full counsel of God and are instead putting stumbling blocks before people. But where God’s word is preached and taught in its truth and purity, then God has promised to work there.

Through the word, the Holy Spirit can bring entire cities to repentance, as He did to Nineveh through Jonah’s preaching, or transform the most zealous persecutor of His Church into one of the most zealous preachers of the Gospel, as He did to St. Paul.

Where the word is front and center, we can rest assured that God will accomplish His purposes, for He has promised us that His word never goes out and returns empty.

When our Lord Jesus Christ spoke to the deaf mute man, He showed us many things.

He showed that His word would give what is truly needed, restoration of ears and tongue and mind to this man, restoration of soul and eternal life and heavenly citizenship to us.

He showed that His word has the power to accomplish what it says, be that speaking to deaf ears and having them hear and obey or speaking to hardened hearts and having them brought to life again.

And He showed us that His word, not the things of this world, is what brings true and lasting restoration. Our God has given us His word and promised to act through it. You may take Him at His word, even as you take others to hear it.

In the name of Jesus, amen.