

September 4, 2022
Text: Mark 7:31-37

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Throughout the Gospels there are many accounts of Jesus doing many different things, and in many of them Jesus isn't specifically recorded as teaching. Our Gospel this morning is one such account. Jesus heals a man who could neither hear nor speak clearly, yet He isn't recorded as saying anything that we might call teaching. That doesn't mean that nothing is being taught, though. Through Jesus' actions as He heals this man, He teaches us quite a bit.

Namely, He here teaches us how God works, why God works, and for what purpose God works. Again, how, why, and for what purpose God works.

So first: how God works. Right off the bat, we see something distinctive: that God both works directly and also works through other people.

How does this deaf and dumb man get to Jesus? Some unnamed people bring him! We're not told specifically who they are – maybe family, maybe friends, maybe members of the man's synagogue, who knows – but it's clear that these people who bring the man believe that Jesus can heal him.

They have faith, and that faith leads them to bring someone they care about to Jesus. Just ordinary people, but people who trusted Jesus and who were used by Him to bring His gracious gifts to another person.

It's also worth noting that when these people bring the man to Jesus, they give us a picture of how God the Holy Spirit works. When they bring the man, we are told that they beg Jesus on the man's behalf.

The word here translated "beg" is connected to how Jesus describes the Holy Spirit. Perhaps you recall in St. John's Gospel where Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "the Advocate" or "the Helper." That word – advocate, helper – that's the begging that these faithful people are doing on the man's behalf. They are advocating for the man to Jesus, asking for Jesus' help on the man's behalf.

He can neither hear nor speak to ask himself, so these others do it for him. Our sin and spiritual blindness, deafness, and muteness prevent us from approaching God or believing in Him, and so the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf, bringing us to faith in Jesus.

The Spirit's intercession doesn't only happen at our conversion, but continues throughout our lives as Christians. As St. Paul writes in Romans, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

Through the Spirit at work in you as Christians, you are able to be used by Him to bring people before Jesus as well. When you pray for others, whomever they might be, God hears your prayers. Your intercession, your advocating, your begging comes before the throne of God Himself, and He will answer in whatever way He knows is best.

Another wonderful example of this action of the Spirit through Christians is the Baptism of infants and small children. No baby brings himself or herself to the font. Rather, parents or others,

acting in faith by the Holy Spirit, bring the child to be washed and clothed with Jesus' righteousness. Baptism is still completely God's work – He is simply using faithful Christian parents as His hands and feet.

Holy Baptism connects to another part of how God works. In healing the deaf and dumb man, Jesus works through both His word and His physical actions. After taking the man aside, Jesus does several things. One of those is speaking the command, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."

This word was no suggestion or plea or request. It was the divine command spoken by the all-powerful God. The same unlimited might which brought all of creation into existence out of nothing with the words "Let there be" now commands this man's ears to be opened, and by extension his tongue to be loosed. Because it is God speaking these words, reality itself must conform to them.

It doesn't matter that the man is deaf and so he can't hear the words, or that this doesn't fit in our understanding of medical science and audiology, or that we aren't able to replicate this feat by ourselves. God's word doesn't depend on us; it depends on God and His almighty power. His word does what it says and says what it does.

Jesus doesn't only speak His word to the man, though. He also acts, physically, for after all, He is God in physical, human flesh. Jesus takes this man aside and puts His fingers in the ears He's about to open. Jesus spits and touches the tongue He's about to loose.

Could He have healed without these actions, using only His words? Sure; He's the all-powerful God. But, He didn't only use words. Jesus coupled the spoken with the physical, and He did so purposefully. Jesus is never random or meaningless in either His words or His actions.

What He did may not have made sense to the man, but it didn't have to. Just like how the power of Jesus' word didn't depend on the deaf man hearing it, so too the power of Jesus' action didn't depend on the man understanding it.

This principle has held true throughout the history of the Christian Church, and it's still true today. God continues to work through actions joined to His word – the Sacraments.

Now, we live in a day and age where the mind and our intellectual understanding are seen as the key things. Christianity is often reduced down to knowing certain things, memorizing certain writings, agreeing with certain statements. Actions are merely symbolic. Belief in Jesus is made into a rational decision, and Baptism is then said to merely be a symbolic action reflecting that decision. The Lord's Supper is just a ritual done to help us recall in our minds the story and work of Jesus.

However, this idea of God working only through rational decision not in keeping with what Jesus does in our Gospel text, or the rest of Scripture, for that matter. Whether He's ordering the Israelites in Egypt to paint blood on their doorposts or having the prophet Elisha throw a stick into the water to make an ax head float or smearing mud in a blind man's eyes and having him wash, the Lord is constantly at work through physical means.

So today, He has His Church baptize with water in His Triune name. He has us eat His true body and drink His true blood in Holy Communion. How does Baptism save, or the Supper grant forgiveness, life, and salvation? Because God says it does!

It's beyond our understanding, and our understanding is limited. But God's power is not limited. Jesus says, "Do this," and so we do it, not out of understanding, but out of faith.

So God works both directly and through other people, He works through His word, and He works physically, as in the Sacraments. That's the how. Now the why. This can be summed up in one word: love. And you don't even have to go to John 3:16 to find this truth, though that is a wonderful verse. No, you can see love here in Jesus' actions.

After Jesus takes the man aside and puts His fingers in his ears and touches his tongue, He looks up to heaven and "sighs." That word, which is also translated as "groan" in other places in Scripture, describes a sound of longing and frustration.

It's the word used in Romans 8:23, where we Christians groan as we wait for our deliverance and redemption in this sinful world. It also pops up in 2 Corinthians 5, as we groan while in this earthly tent, waiting to be brought to the eternal dwellings of God.

Jesus is not sighing out of exasperation, or being fed up with having to heal sick people. No, this is our Lord groaning as He beholds with compassion and empathy this man whom He created, whom sin has broken.

Jesus looks up into heaven, the realm of perfection, longing for the day when He will return and make all things new, when Our Father's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Remember, God created all things out of love, especially mankind. He made us that He might share His love with us, and that we might reciprocate that love both back to Him and with one another. In love, He made this world and ordered it perfectly so that we would have somewhere wonderful to live, and so that we might have purpose, tending and keeping creation in His stead.

However, in sin, in love turned inward, we have poisoned all this. We no longer love God nor our neighbor as we should. We see creation as ours to use however we please.

This sin corrupts everything, causing all to fall into disorder and ruin. The man is deaf and dumb because of sin. His suffering was not God's intended purpose for him, nor is the suffering you endure God's intended purpose for you.

When you groan under the weight of your burdens, you have a God who groans with you, who desires even more than you do to put all things right. You have a Savior who hears your cries and in love echoes them to His Father on your behalf.

This love – the why – leads then to the purpose for which God works. God doesn't act to show off or try to impress anyone. Note that Jesus takes the man away from the crowd. He's not there to put on a divine show.

No, Jesus loves the man and acts to restore him, to make him whole again. That restoration is the purpose for which He acts in all things. All that our Lord does is done ultimately to restore His people and bring them into His eternal presence.

Sometimes that means He has to use suffering, to break us of our idols and force us to realize that we must look only to Him for our good. Sometimes the way and the when in which He works don't make sense to us.

The deaf man may have wondered why he had to suffer so long before being healed. Yet at the right time, the Lord did heal and restore him, and his story was recorded to teach all those who read it, including us this morning.

The Lord Jesus is at work in His word, in His Sacraments, showing forth His love, with the purpose of restoring you to Himself. The things that He does in your life are done to bring you and others closer to Him, especially His eternal presence.

Sometimes He may know that physical restoration and worldly blessing are the best thing for you at that time. Other times, He will send hardship and trials your way. But He is never far off. He is always at work.

His cross is the greatest example of how and why and to what purpose He works. He caused others to bring Him to the cross, doing His will even as they thought they were destroying Him. He both spoke His words, such as, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," and He physically hung there, actual nails and thorns and spear bringing forth His real blood, shed for the forgiveness of your sins.

He did all this, suffered all this, out of love for you. And He did it for the purpose that, just as He rose in His glorified body on the third day, you too might rise to glory on the Last Day, to dwell in His peace and joy forever.

The Lord God is at work for you. Don't shun His work or take it for granted, but rather rejoice in it, that He who does all things well does them for you, His Christians.

In the name of Jesus, amen.