

Open Says Me!
Mark 7:24-37
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As you leave here today, do not, under any circumstances, no way, no how, not ever, in a million years, under pain of death or threat of torture, never, and I mean never ever, tell anyone — not man, woman, child, dog, or stone — what has happened here today. Did I make myself clear? No matter what you experience today, no matter how miraculous, no matter how moving, you must tell no one about it. And on top of that, you can't speak about it to anyone. And no pantomime either, no pictionary, no charades, nada. It's like it didn't happen, got it? C'mon, I didn't hear you. Got it? That's better.

Good, now that I have simultaneously bound you to silence and instilled in you a burning desire to tell everyone you know about this secret you are supposed to keep, we can have a look at these two little stories in Mark, one about a woman whose words are so powerful that she causes Jesus, the Son of God, to back down and change his mind, and the other about a man who has no words at all, yet becomes a babbling brook and does what none of you are going to do when he tells everybody what happened. In these stories, Jesus is taking a little tour through some Gentile lands, trying to find some down time in his ever busy schedule. He is not as successful as he would like to be and finds himself on the losing end of a verbal sparring match with a persistent woman in search of relief for her demon-

possessed child. After admitting that she has a good point, and healing her daughter, Jesus finds himself faced with someone who does not have the same ability to convince the Son of Man of the worthiness of his cause, a man who cannot hear and who has a speech impediment. Jesus has mercy on him, takes him aside, does some hocus pocus, and, as it says, “immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.” All the people are amazed and disobey Jesus’ command to remain silent, as I’m sure none of you will do, and Jesus’ fame grows.

Before we continue with this story, let me just say a few words about this command of silence. The passages in Mark in which Jesus tells people not to repeat what they have observed are often referred to as the so-called Messianic Secret. Jesus seems to be asking people to keep his Messiahhood from becoming too well known. Dedicated Biblical scholars over the centuries, not being able to find out exactly what either the Evangelist or Jesus had in mind, have advanced any number of theories about what this secretkeeping is all about. For those of you who would like to know more about these theories, I can refer you to any number of books or articles on the subject, but the shorthand for tonight’s episode of the Messianic secret is that it beautifully sets up the ever increasing crowds which play a role in upcoming stories in Mark, especially the very next one in which four thousand people are fed with the meager provisions of seven loaves and a few fish.

For this evening, I would like to make a few observations about the second story, the one in which the deaf stutterer is restored to the full use of his linguistic faculties and encounters Christ in a life changing way. Here is a man almost completely cut off from the world around him, and literally unable to hear the news about Jesus and the healing he can bring. Remember now that this is before more enlightened social policy, before the Americans with Disabilities Act, before Helen Keller, before recognition that a malady like deafness is not punishment for sin. There was no sign language, there were no special schools, nothing but silence and frustrating attempts to speak with a crooked tongue. This man has, however, something rather rare in those days for social outcasts such as himself. He has friends, people who did not ostracize him for his disability, but who cared enough for him that when they themselves heard something about this man Jesus, they summoned their courage and did the only thing they could do for their friend, that which he could not do for himself: they used their ears and their voices and responded for him, bringing him to Jesus and, as it says, “begging him to lay his hand on him.” These friends, these unnamed heroes, through their care for their friend, introduce him to Jesus and his life is never the same.

There is a lesson for us here folks, a lesson which should not be overlooked in light of our upcoming “Invite a Friend” Sunday on October 7. Like the deaf man’s friends, you have heard about this Jesus guy, you have experienced what he can do in your life and in the lives of people you know and admire. And just as the

deaf man was physically unable to hear the word of God and physically unable to speak, and therefore beg Jesus the way the Syrophenecian woman did, so too are the vast majority of the English-speaking community physically unable to hear the Word of God because they are not in church on Sunday evening, or any other time of the week, and unable to ask God for help because they lack the vocabulary of faith that we have so wonderfully received. In four weeks from tonight, you have a wonderful opportunity to do precisely what the deaf man's friends did: bring their friend that God might open his ears and his life to the message of God's amazing grace. Start making your list.

The vision for Invite a Friend Sunday is to have more visitors here than members. That happens at ECF occasionally, but only during the summer months when visiting mission teams outnumber those who are not on vacation, but it doesn't happen regularly. And so if that vision were to be realized, do you know what that means? First, it means that we may have to set up extra chairs if you do your job right. Can you just imagine this place that full? But more importantly, it means that you will have to do your part. You can't leave it up to somebody else. It means that you will have to overcome your fear and trembling about outing yourself as a Christian. It will mean that you will have to put yourself on the line for what you believe in. It means that you will have to exhibit some of the holy boldness and audacity that the deaf man's friends had when they brought him to Jesus because they loved him. It means you will have to take by the hand people

who will be wary of a new place and a new experience, and gently guide them to a place where they can be touched by God and have their lives opened by God.

Invite-a-Friend Sunday is not an exercise in church growth. It is a gift waiting to be opened by people you know and love.

The other thing I want to say about this story relates to the idea of being opened to God. When Jesus looks up to heaven, sighs, and says “Ephphatha,” “Be opened,” you cannot help but get the sense that he means more than the man’s ear canals, that he is speaking about the man’s perception of God, and what God has done for him, and what God has in store for him, now that he will be able to hear. What has opened before this stuttering deaf man is the very kingdom of God, the very point Mark is trying to make by telling this story. “They were astounded,” it says, “beyond measure,” and the people who witnessed what had happened to the man recognized that Jesus was bringing what they knew God would bring, liberation to the captives, sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, a transformation of the world. This is why, no matter how much he ordered it, the people could not keep to themselves the stories of what they had seen take place.

I want to challenge you with a question I’d like you to consider over the next few months, and that question is this: How is God opening you and how are you responding to God saying, “Be opened”? How is God opening you and how are you responding to God saying, “Be opened”? What doors is God opening in your family, in your job, in your prayer life? How is your heart being opened to greater

compassion and justice? How have you responded when God has said to you “Be opened”? Have you allowed yourself to be opened and to experience the very kingdom of God? These are the questions of faith, ones that need to be asked not just once, but all the time.

These of course are the question not only for each of us, but for this church as a whole: How is God opening this church and how are we responding to God saying “Be opened”? What and who is God calling us to be in Escazú in the year 2012, in the midst of our neighbors and friends, and surrounded by people who are unable to hear the God who is saying to them, as well as to us, “Be opened.” It has been some time since we intentionally sought God’s leading, almost four years to be precise. Some of you were not yet with us when we began asking God to “open the eyes of our hearts,” to use the words from one of the songs we often sing here. And we believe that God did just that, that God opened us up, and we have been laboring according to the vision God gave us of being “A World of Travelers, Safely Home.” As a result of that process four years ago, we have made great strides in undertaking a more intentional outreach to the community by offering Christian counseling, by making our children’s ministry wonderfully strong and attractive, and by partnering with community ministries to help address the hurts and hopes of our wider community. I think some good has come as a result of our efforts, that some ears have been opened and some tongues loosed with speech. I know people have not been keeping it a secret, that word is spreading. But that

isn't the end of God's story for us, and I believe it is the time to seek again God's leading, and to ask ourselves collectively, "To what are you opening us, Lord?" And when we are opened, it is my prayer that like the people who saw the deaf man hear, and heard his words clearly, that we will proclaim what God has done for us as zealously as those who witnessed the miracle that day. But remember, don't tell a soul! Amen.