

Open for Business
A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
10 September 2006
Text: Mark 7:31-37

It's been a few Septembers since I had to write a required "What I Did on My Summer Vacation" report, which is too bad, because this summer provided lots of material. There was the stunning demotion of Pluto from the 9th planet in our solar system to something called a "sub-planet" pretty much on a par with chopped liver. While I cast about for a new sentence to mnemonically remember the planetary order: *My very eccentric mother just served up new potatoes...* others have calmly made room for this latest rocket science revelation: I've already heard a friend's job change described as his being "Pluto-nized." Then there was the week I spent on jury duty in Cuyahoga County. I found myself eliminated from jury pools again and again, by prosecutors who associated "minister" with "mercy" and concluded that equaled "soft on crime." Finally, baseball. When I moved here from, ironically, Detroit, I thought I was finally, finally going to live in a real baseball town. Well. Just wait till next year!

A backward glance at summer now, poised on the threshold of a new season. School's back in session, most college students have begun a new term. Already the days grow shorter, the nights cooler as if demanding we notice time's swift passage. How quickly the universe shifts and what we thought was solid ground turns out to be mere "sub-planetary material." I resonate with the tag line of an insurance company ad that says, "Because life comes at you fast." So fast, sometimes, it seems impossible to absorb. Yet the gears of justice grind predictably; the war cranks on interminably; the players play their parts; we pin our hopes on tomorrow, next year, next life. Everything changes, yet nothing changes. What do we really know for sure? And what are we supposed to do about it?

The morning gospel text is a story of change, a story of healing, of a life transformed through an encounter with Jesus. Yet it is not only the deaf man's ears that are unstopped and tongue that is released into speech. Those who brought him to Jesus, and the crowd that has gathered – these, too, find their world shaken; the predictable turned on its ear—one that is newly sensitive to sound and word. Listen with your ears and with your spirit for God's word in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the seventh chapter at the 31st verse. [MARK 7:31-37]

Imagine for a moment a world without sound. Never to hear music...never to hear sounds, like a cricket chirping or a distant midnight train...never to hear from a beloved voice husky with emotion, I love you. Of course there are ways to communicate without speech, but the potential for a sense of isolation and disconnection from others and the world is great without some mutually-agreed-upon method to give and receive meaning. The man in this biblical text lived in a world of silence, unable either to hear or talk clearly, to understand or to be understood. In many ways he lived in that world alone.

This morning I invite us to consider the ways this text describes a spiritual condition, one that isolates us from God and from one another. You know it if you have ever felt ignored or dismissed in a congregation whose explicit mission is "to build an inviting, caring, and challenging community of men and women, youth, and children." You know it if you have ever felt stuck in a life situation that seemed imprisoning, and from which you could not break free. You know it if you have ever wanted to speak up, but something kept you quiet; or the times when you wanted to reach out to another person, but something held you back. Spiritual deafness traps the truth and beauty that is inside each person so that it cannot be freely expressed. God's liberating Word of life and love is drowned out by other messages. Is it any wonder, then, that we find it difficult to share our faith or even invite a friend to worship with us?

Did you notice that the text says that others brought the deaf man to Jesus, and made the request for healing? Perhaps the man himself had given up hope that things could possibly be different for him. Did he come willingly? Reluctantly? Skeptically? Jesus takes him aside, apart from the crowd—this is not a public spectacle: “the amazing Jesus performing feats of power” to dazzle the crowd into belief. His actions suggest a ritualized formula for healing—human saliva was thought to have curative powers, and the heavenward glance and sigh an invocation of the Divine.

A single word shatters the screaming silence: *Ephphatha! Be opened!*

And the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was released. He could both hear and speak plainly. And then like a flood, there’s no stopping it. The former deaf man, and all those who have witnessed his transformation cannot be silenced. They have to tell it. It is too wonderful, too compelling to keep inside. And now it can be told. . . . I wonder if some in the crowd remembered the ancient prophecies that when Messiah comes “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.” Is Jesus the one? Perhaps his disciples recalled Jesus being questioned by John the Baptist’s followers: “Are you the One?” And Jesus’ response: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk; lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear...”

Friends, this is the Word that comes to you and me as well, that unbinds our spirits, that enables us to reclaim who we are, find our voices, and go and tell what we have heard and experienced. *Ephphatha—be opened.* How shall we receive it?

Many of us are so used to the roar of competing voices—the din of marketplace and politics—that we are not even aware of our deafness to God’s Word. Some of us have identified our need, but aren’t sure how to change our reality. And perhaps

not a few of us are fearful of placing ourselves into the hands of others. We don't want to relinquish control and admit our vulnerability. But Jesus is there before us, individually and as a congregation, extending to each of us and to all of us an invitation: "Be opened." Notice that it's not "be open" as if you could change your attitude or perspective as easily as you change your clothes. Be opened. Allow the power of God to change your heart, to open it up in way that lets you hear and speak, to listen to others, and find your unique voice to share.

In October, Fairmount will kick off a year of celebrating our 90th anniversary as a Heights congregation. It's going to be a great party, with opportunity to reminisce with former members and clergy. Pastor Emeritus Hank Andersen will speak on October 8, and he and Mary will be here through the weekend to greet old friends. History is a great teacher providing excellent resources with which to build a strong future. Our anniversary year will give us time to look back and remember with gratitude the ways God has worked in and through Fairmount.

But it will also be a time to look forward, to envision a faithful future and map a way towards it. Your Session has worked hard during the past two years to help us do exactly that. We began to think about growth, about reversing the trends in mainline churches of declining membership and worship attendance, trends mirrored in Fairmount for some 25 years. *Numerical* growth was part of the exploration, but *spiritual* growth was equally important. How can we grow in our commitment to Jesus Christ, and our understanding of Christ's call to us? How can we deepen a sense of spiritual connection with God and with one another? How do we respond to the demographic changes of our core community and its increasingly multicultural population? We identified Fairmount's clear strengths and attributes. We visited other churches in the metropolitan area and around the country to examine "best practices." We read and studied church growth literature, and spent time in serious discussion and prayer about our identity and mission.

What has emerged from that exploration is a framework for doing ministry and mission that we believe will lead toward spiritual renewal and growth. The framework offers specific plans to help us connect with one another and with ministry opportunities that are personally meaningful and faith-nurturing. We'll produce a new pictorial directory—a "facebook"--that will include "friends" as well as members. We'll all have opportunity to complete a short "spiritual gifts inventory" that can give us greater ability to choose activities that allow us to exercise those gifts as well as feed our soul. We're reaching out to visitors and people who use our church for non-worship activities, including the music series, various 12-step programs, the co-op nursery, and Open Doors afterschool program. We've secured the services of a marketing consultant who will assist us as we find our voice and effectively tell our story, taking full advantage of cyber-technology with our website, podcasting our services, and creating a CD with music and preaching highlights to give to visitors. We're investigating a wide range of spirituality practices such as the labyrinth and spiritual direction to provide more opportunities for soul nourishment. The formation of a Diversity Council will strengthen our exploration of what it means to be a truly vibrant, multicultural congregation in which members from a broad spectrum of human conditions will call Fairmount "home" and find a place in which to grow spiritually. The growth framework is presented in a spirit of invitation, not coercion. We're simply asking you to consider where you feel a tug of anticipation, even a faint whisper reaching your ears~~and discover how you can share your unique perspective and array of gifts in the company of Fairmount family and friends, toward the most important enterprise of all: building the realm of God on earth, as it is in heaven.

The theme of our anniversary celebration is "For 90 years, a light in the Heights." The light we have is of course derivative, for it comes from the heart of God in the person of Jesus Christ. We have the light of Christ to hold up as a beacon,

both to illuminate and to guide, ourselves and others we have yet to meet. The power to heal hard-of-hearing humans lies with God alone, which is why no one can say for sure where our map will take us. It's an invitation to let Christ change us, from the inside out. And who knows where that will lead?

Be opened. If that's a little scary to you, join us! Our lives, in their glorious, frustrating mix of disability and empowerment, fear and freedom, are not to be lived alone. We are called into community by reason of our shared humanity and our identity as the people of God. We are BOTH the person in need of healing, and the ones who bring that person to Jesus. We can help each other receive healing. We listen for the Word as it is spoken by others---perhaps very different from the Word as we perceive it. We welcome seekers and questioners, doubters and dreamers. For starters, may we share *this* word with neighbors and friends, family and strangers: Fairmount Church is open for business!

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN.

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