

Be Opened
Mark 7:31-37
September 12, 2021
First Presbyterian, Luling

One of my more annoying habits, one that Andy is too nice to complain about, is that I tend to leave things open. Dresser drawers, so that the next person walking by whacks their knees on them. Bathroom drawers, which is why my side of the vanity is the one next to the wall. Kitchen cabinet doors as I'm unloading the dishwasher, but then I just leave them open. I have no explanation for this, other than sheer laziness, I guess. I close doors behind me, I turn off light switches, I know to close gates if I'm the one that opened them, I'm generally a responsible person, but I do tend to leave drawers and cabinet doors open.

This came to mind because of this reading from Mark. Jesus heals the deaf and speechless man with the words "Be opened," so I got to thinking of things that are open or closed. Drawers, doors, gates. Stores. Roads—we don't often think of roads being open, because they are almost all the time, but boy do we notice when they are closed.

Also, and more significantly, hearts and minds can be either closed or open. I don't know about you, but as this pandemic has dragged on and on and on, I find myself being more closed off from other people, especially strangers. And I mean closed to other people in all kinds of ways. Physically, for sure. I first avoided occupying the same rooms as other people, though I've gradually loosened up about that a bit, but am still way more closed than I was two years ago. I avoid being close to people and touching people. I hide behind my mask when I go out in public, no longer feeling the need to smile at strangers. And that's all a change for sure. But there's something deeper. I find myself being closed off to other people's lives—the good and the painful parts—in a way I wasn't before. There are enough challenges and troubles in the lives of the people I already know and love that I feel like I can't absorb anyone else into my circles, because I know they will bring their own troubles along with them. I hope it isn't just me that's finding myself less open than I used to be. And at the same time, I hope there are some people out there who are managing to stay open to other people, because I know the need is great.

Just before Jesus encounters this man who can't hear and can't speak, he himself has been opened by the Syrophenician woman. She pushes him to heal her daughter, a Gentile, he initially says "not yet," but she does not give up, and Jesus heals her daughter from afar. He goes further into Gentile territory, in a roundabout way, more open to ministry to Gentiles than he has been before, and encounters this man.

Mark simply says "they brought to him," and I find myself wondering who "they" are. Mark is the only gospel writer who tells this story, so we can't compare any other versions to find out who they are. Mark also tells the story of the four people who lowered the paralyzed man through the roof, so that Jesus could heal him. In that story Jesus credits the faith of the friends—when he saw *their* faith, he said the man was healed. I'd like to think that the "they" in this story are friends of the man who can't speak or hear, but I also am realistic enough to know that it's hard to be friends with such a person. So maybe they are his brothers or cousins or family members who love him and want him to be able to hear and speak. They are open to the man who needs healing. They are open to Jesus being the person who can heal him. And

they aren't at all passive in their openness—they "beg" Jesus to heal him.

Jesus takes the man who can't hear or speak off by himself, in private. There's quite the interaction between the two—Jesus touches him in various ways. And then Jesus says to him, "Be opened." And his ears are opened, and he can hear. His mouth is opened, his tongue is loosed, and he can speak. His opportunities and life are opened up in a way that must have been quite startling to him. He is open to his community in a way he has not been before, and likely his community is open to him in a way they have not been before.

I want to listen to those words closely. Be opened. That's a command. But it's different than be open. Be opened and be open. If we are commanded to be open, it's something we do ourselves. We open up ourselves, we work on ourselves to have open minds and hearts and homes and churches and maybe not open drawers and cabinet doors. Be open is something we do. But that man cannot open his own ears, nor loosen his own tongue. Goodness knows, if he could, he would have done so before now.

What Jesus tells the man is different. Be opened. It's a command, but it's in the grammatical passive voice. It's what you would say to the drawer. Be opened, drawer. The drawer receives the action of being opened, but it isn't doing any action itself. Be opened, man who cannot speak or hear. The man isn't performing any action himself. He hasn't even gotten himself to Jesus—he has been brought to Jesus by people who love him. He is the recipient of others' actions throughout the story. And he is the recipient of Jesus's action of opening. Be opened, closed ears. Be opened, closed mouth.

And for us, who have boarded up our hearts a bit, who have shut down our minds because they were overloaded or overwrought? We hear that same command. Be opened. But that is not a command we can fulfill by ourselves. Jesus is the actor for that command, just as he was for the deaf man. Jesus is acting to open our hearts and our minds, just as he acted to open ears and mouth.

Jesus also, despite his best efforts, opens the mouths of the crowd who see what he has done for this man. They tell everyone they know about what has happened: "he has done everything well," they say. "He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Jesus is able to open whatever it is we have tried to close. And Jesus will do it well.