

HOMILY
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In ancient Greece, it was customary for peddlers to walk the streets with their wares and yell out, "What do you lack?" The idea was to let people know they were in the vicinity and to arouse the curiosity of people. Coming out of their houses, people would want to know what the peddler was selling. It might be something they lacked and something they needed or something they desired. So, what do you lack? What do you desire?

In today's Gospel story we heard about a man who lacked the physical ability to hear. Imagine what life would be like if we couldn't hear the world of sounds around us. Without physical hearing, how could we enjoy the voices that we love to hear; the familiar voices of friends and family, conversations whereby we share stories and jokes and other great insights? Without physical hearing, how can we enjoy the laughter of a little baby or a cry that reminds us of how precious and dear they might be?

I remember five years ago when our world came to a hushed silence on 9/11. I remember the intense quiet of the night. Later that evening, after the terrible events of that early morning, I remember how maddening the quiet was of our town. No traffic, no sounds. What a great sound it was to hear the train's whistle at 4 o'clock in the morning to kind of say life was back in business.

To be sure, the loss of our hearing would be a tragic event, but no more tragic than having perfect hearing and refusing to listen to those who truly love us. The story we heard today was about a man who couldn't hear. But let us consider a person who *will not* hear. I cannot think of a spiritual disease that has led to more disasters than has this one. I am convinced that not listening to people, failing to hear what they are really saying, has led to more divorces, more family breakups, more run away children, more mental illness, and more total despondency than any other behavior.

To be sure, the story of the healing of the deaf and mute man is first and foremost the story of Jesus' power to heal and confirmation that he indeed is the Messiah. But we must not miss the deeper message in the miracle—Jesus has come to open the ears of a spiritually deaf world.

A story is told of a father and his young daughter who had a very strained relationship for some time. Returning from a trip, the father did something that was unusual for him. As he entered the room, he presented his daughter with a necklace that he had bought her. Completely overcome with joy by the unexpected act of giving, the young girl inadvertently dropped the necklace and went running from the room with tears in her eyes. She returned shortly only to find as she walked into the room that her new necklace was around the neck of her infant baby sister. "Oh," said the father, "I went on and gave it to her. You didn't like it anyway." My friends, he wasn't listening; he wasn't listening.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." We listen to these words of Jesus, but do we hear them? Jesus taught us to pray: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We listen to these words of Jesus, but do we hear them? Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." We listen to these words, but do we hear them?

Do you know what many times the problem is? The problem is that we talk too much. How we love the sound of our own voice. And even when we do listen to others, we are usually thinking ahead of what we are going to say as the other person slows up just a little bit. There was a fifth grade teacher who decided that she would use this listening process with her children. Every morning for five minutes she required them to be totally quiet. That's hard for any of us to do, much less a fifth grader. She discovered that a great deal of good came with the experience of silence. After one of these quiet times, she asked the students if they heard anything. One boy said, "Yes, I heard something say that I should be more obedient to my parents." Another said, "I heard something say that you must always be fair. When you are tagged and nobody sees it, you're still out."

There is no substitute for listening. Over and over again Jesus showed this quality of spiritual listening. One day he was teaching to a large crowd in Jerusalem when he was suddenly interrupted by the shouts of a lonely beggar. What the crowd heard that day was the rude interruption of a nobody. What Jesus heard was the cry of a person in need.

That is how to hear—with the ear of a Shepherd. We listen to the 6 o'clock news and we hear shouting and violence and protests when we should be hearing the voices of sheep without a Shepherd.

We have to start listening to one another. Husbands and wives have to start listening. Parents and children have to start hearing. Church members have to start hearing each other. It's not always easy; but when we stop trying, we stop being a family.

Jesus placed his hands on the beggar's ears and spoke, "Ephphata. That is, "be opened!" And today we need to allow the Holy Spirit to place his hands over our ears and speak the words "be opened." Then and only then will we be able to hear and speak. Then we, too, can shout with affirmation, as did the crowd that day, "This man Jesus has done all things well. He even makes the deaf to hear."