

Text: Mark 7:31-37

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, *Amen*.

In this portion of St Mark's Gospel, Jesus returns to Galilee from Tyre and Sidon through the Decapolis. The Decapolis was a region of ten free cities. They were not governed by Herod, tetrarch of Galilee. Many Gentiles lived there. A deaf-mute is brought to Jesus as He passed. Whoever brought him begged that Jesus would but touch him. Jesus takes him aside by himself and heals him. Jesus places His fingers into the man's ears and spits and anoints the man's tongue. These gestures communicate to the man that Jesus is going to open his ears and loose his tongue. Jesus looks up to heaven, sighs and says Ephphatha, "Be opened" and the man hears and speaks. By looking up to heaven, Jesus communicates that He is from heaven and does all His works in accord with His Father's will. He says, "Be opened!" to show that His word is powerful. He who said "Let there be light" also says, "Ephphatha" and it is so.

The crowd is astonished by this miracle and says, "He does all things well!" But Jesus bids them be silent about it. He does not want them to marvel over and spout off about the physical healing they saw. Rather, Jesus wants them to ponder why He comes to heal. He wants them to conclude that this healing is but a sign that testifies of something greater Jesus does—save from sin.

Now, the question from this text I want to ask and answer is this: why did Jesus touch and spit? Why not just say "Be opened!" or for that matter just snap His fingers?

The answer is in the crowd's response. They say, "He does all things well." He does. Jesus acted in a way that was fitting for that man's condition as a deaf-mute. His touch and spit and upward gaze entered that man's reality so that He would know for certain what Jesus was doing for Him. And here's the principle to draw from this incident. Jesus does all things well for us. He makes sure that we can understand, grasp, experience, possess, and so hold fast to the salvation He offers.

And so He uses means to save us. God does not snap His fingers to bring us to faith. That would not be fitting. But He uses His creatures, real people and physical things, to accomplish His purpose—to save us, to give us His grace in the forgiveness of sins won for us by Jesus through His suffering, death, and resurrection. We call the things God uses the means of grace. The means of grace are the word, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and even, in a way, the pastor.

Why would God do this? Why has He ordained that people only come to faith through the preaching of His word, that they be saved in baptism, that they receive the forgiveness of sins in the sacrament of the altar, that they have a pastor to give them

these things? Because He does all things well. This arrangement is fitting for us and it's what we need.

It's fitting because we are physical, bodily creatures. When He made man, God could have said, "Let there be man!" just like He said, "Let there be light." But God didn't do that. The Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground, and breathed His Spirit upon Him and the man became a living being. God worked through physical means to create man. This was glorious and fitting.

God chooses to redeem fallen man in the same way. God takes on a body with which to save sinful flesh. He uses wood of a tree to redeem those ate from a tree. From our perspective this way might seem totally unnecessary. But it is fitting. God redeems the created world by using the things of this creation.

He also sanctifies us, He makes us holy, He gives faith and life by using the things of this creation. Water is necessary for life on this earth, and so He uses water as the means by which we are granted life eternal. This body must eat to live. And so He takes bread and wine and uses them to give out His body and blood to nourish our faith.

This is not only a fitting way to save physical creatures but needed. The means of grace are needed because of our condition. We are like that deaf-mute. We are pitifully handicapped because sin constrains our perspective. As sinful flesh we are tempted to doubt God's mercy toward us. He says that His Son died on the cross for us, but how can that be so? How can we be sure? How do we know that this isn't all some false promise or wistful dream? From our stunted perspective, it often seems that God is far off, and we are all alone.

But as God entered that deaf-mute's life and communicated to him through a medium suited to his condition, so He does the same for us. God touched the man's ears, He dabbed spit on His tongue, to assure him that He was there to heal. God's uses the means of grace to strengthen your faith, to assure you that the forgiveness Jesus won for the entire world when He paid for sin with His innocent suffering and death, and rose triumphant from the grave, is yours.

You are a bodily creature. As a child you were comforted on your mother's breast and knew for certain that her love was yours. The means of grace offer the certainty of God's love. The God who created you as body and soul does all things well for your sake. You experience bodily His means of grace so that you can be certain that forgiveness is yours.

He washes you with water and attaches a promise to it. He says that at the washing you experienced He saved you from death and hell, gave you forgiveness of sins, poured His Holy Spirit into your heart, promised you life eternal in the resurrection.

He gives you bread and wine and says that the bread you eat is His body given into death in your stead, and the wine you drink is the blood He shed to forgive you your sins. The one who eats really has life and forgiveness. Because you partake you can be certain that God is near to you. You have experienced His care. You are sure of His mercy.

Jesus healed the deaf-mute with a touch because He does all things well. Everything He does fits just so. The means of grace, the way in which He gives the forgiveness He has won to us, is perfectly suited to who we are as bodily creatures. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gifts!

Now, there's one more comparison I'd like to make today. It's this. God's use of physical means to save us is also the basis for using physical ceremonies in church. Using physical gestures, postures, movements in worship is fitting. It's fitting because we're bodily creatures who glorify God in our bodies. Gestures and movements help give expression to the inner worship of faith. They communicate the significance of standing in the presence of the holy God to receive His gracious gifts.

The New Testament doesn't lay down any rules about what to do. It's left to freedom. The Church simply looks at the worship of the Old Testament and the details in the New to inform her practice. In the Lutheran Church, we value physical ceremonies and keep them alive because we see that they are fitting. God interacts with us through physical means. And so respond with physical gestures that adorn our worship.

That's why we have customs like bowing the head at the Name of Jesus or when we say Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. We bow before the altar when we take communion. It's fitting. We're bodily creatures who use our bodies to show our respect for God, His name, His deeds.

We can make the sign of the cross to remember the means by which Jesus saved us. A pastor doesn't have to stretch out his hand and make the sign of the cross for the words of absolution or for the final blessing. It's just a ceremony. But it is fitting.

Physical ceremonies acknowledge our reality. They engage us as who we are—creatures of body and soul. They serve the Church's proclamation of the crucified, living, Christ, who works through means to save.

Jesus, who touches, spits, speaks to enter a deaf-mute's tortured reality is the blessed Lord who bleeds, dies, yet lives, who washes, feeds, to save. He enters your life through His means of grace. He uses men, water, bread, wine as His means, His way, to sustain you. Why? Because it's what you need. It's fit for you. So truly, He does all things well!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, *Amen*.