

23rd Sunday Ordinary Time**9-9-2018**Isaiah 35:4-7^a

Psalm 146

James 2:1-5

Mark 7:31-37

This gospel reading has that fun word in it spelled like this e-p-h-p-h-a-t-h-a. Always fun to pronounce. Even more interesting is its meaning. It's a Greek word that means "*be opened.*" This is the word that Jesus uses to speak to the man that he heals of deafness and speech impediment. Ephphatha.

There is something curious about the story. Jesus doesn't just use a word to heal. Why not? Remember, he is the one who spoke, and the universe sprang into being. He spoke, and the wind and the waves obeyed him. But that is not how Jesus heals this time. Jesus brought the man off by himself away from the crowd. He put his finger into the man's ears, and spitting, touched his tongue; then he looked up to heaven and groaned.

This is different. It's earthy – kind of yucky, actually. Ear hair, ear wax, and spit. It almost makes us want to groan. More like an "ewwww." We are, after all, the generation that uses hand sanitizer, disinfectants, and try our darndest to avoid germs.

But life is by its nature rather earthy. It is a physical process, taking us from pampers to pimples to pushing up daisies. And this very earthy life is what God himself enters into with us. God is in the mess with us. He shows a complete willingness to be with us in all our circumstances.

Ear hair, ear wax, and spit, are hardly our best features. We'd rather hide those aspects of our lives - so much so that we would prefer that God not touch us in that way. But Jesus demonstrates his humility – he enters into the mess with us.

In the gospel of John, when Jesus shared the last supper with his disciples, he showed them its meaning by washing their feet. Remember, they wore sandals and walked in streets that were full of dust and camel and horse "souvenirs." People had very dirty feet. To show the meaning of the Eucharist Jesus knelt down in front of them and washed those dirty feet. The disciples were, of course, shocked.

And so are we, quite frankly. We prefer to meet God through lovely stained glass windows and pretty holy cards. Pristine sanctity. And yet, God's purpose is to gather all of humanity – from the socially acceptable to all the rest of us – so that we all can receive his healing touch. We are lovingly touched by God. From the waters of baptism to the oils of confirmation to standing, kneeling, sitting, singing,

and exchanging the sign of peace. God meets us where we are most broken when we confess our sins in the Sacrament of Penance. God meets us when our bodies are broken by injury or disease in the anointing of the sick. God meets us in the last rites on our deathbed when we receive the holy Eucharist in viaticum. This is what it means for us to have a saving and sacramental relationship with Jesus Christ as his Church. Our worship of God is incarnational and we are in this together. God meets us exactly where we are. We are his people.

We come here together acknowledging the messiness of our lives. Messier still than ear wax and spit, we come here in our brokenness. We come here bruised by tough situations. We come here sorrowing from life's tragedies. Those are the places where we all really hurt. Those broken aspects of our lives.

It is here in the mess, "*while we were yet sinners,*" that the Lord of life has offered to us his own body and blood, soul and divinity in the Eucharist. Our God becomes so humble and approachable that he is with us in the form of bread and wine. He feeds us with his holy presence. He lifts us up. Our Lord calls to us through Word and through Sacrament. He meets us in the mess. He sanctifies us. He calls us to become his saints. He calls us to be "*rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him.*"

Listen once again to his word to the deaf man. This is his word to us as well.

Ephphatha.

Be opened to hearing and speaking the goodness of God.

Be opened to one another without distinction among us.

Be opened to our God, Emmanuel, who comes to be with us and to dwell in our hearts.