

September 9, 2018 – 23rd Sunday, Ordinary Time
“Ephphatha” – Mark 7:34

Mark’s is the shortest of the Gospels and the oldest or first. Mark doesn’t mince words. Jesus moves across Galilee (perhaps for a rest), moves from Tyre (outside the boundary of Palestine) to the Decapolis...Gentile territory. People of faith bring him a deaf mute. Jesus pulls him aside...touches his ears, then spits, and with the spittle touches his mouth. He says one word, groaning (loud enough for others to hear): “Ephphatha!” The man is cured!

Jesus pulls the man aside. Note that the crowd has brought the man to Jesus, believing in some way that Jesus’ touch can heal him. Jesus communicates with him by gestures the man can understand...and the crowd as well: he touches him. (The use of spittle is an indication that this is an old gospel story, Fr. Karban notes in commentary, BECAUSE of the details.) Later miracle stories simply note that Jesus touched him and he was healed BECAUSE of the faith of people who came to him.

Ephphatha! It’s an Aramaic word that means “Open”. It was a one word command of Jesus that immediately opened his ears and tongue. It began with Jesus’ openness to healing the man, BUT it was also said loud enough that those nearby heard it. “Open” or be opened. Jesus is open to the man’s plight and does something about it.

But it was also aimed at the crowd. As Jesus was open to the plight of others, so must his disciples be. As Jesus acted for healing, so must his disciples act to accept the diversity of all who came to him. Jesus hears the pleas of those who have heard the man’s affliction and speak to Jesus asking for healing.

On another level, this Gospel was written down for us. We are called to be OPEN (TO LISTEN) to God’s presence in ourselves and others, particularly those who have no voice. We are called to see and listen to the powerless around us and do what we’re able to do to ease their plight.

Like most of us, they had seen and read about the undocumented immigrants being arrested in unlikely places all over the country. But in January it became real to them, when a member of their New Jersey Presbyterian parish was taken away. Roby was well-liked and well-known, a man of deep and sincere faith, a husband and father whose family had been in their church pews every Sunday. They became a congregation of peaceful bystanders to becoming a community of active protesters.

As the pastor writes: “Our eyes were opened. We woke up because Roby and his family grew up with us; in church, in school, in our town. They are part of our family... Since his arrest, the parish has organized legal assistance for Roby and support of his family... Roby’s future is still unknown. There is only one thing I can say for certain: the Spirit came to our community one cold winter day and opened our eyes and warmed our hearts.”

Roby’s arrest was an “Ephphatha” moment for this parish: a new awareness of the dignity and honor of the most vulnerable in their midst, a renewed appreciation that all men and women of every race and nationality and culture are made in the image and likeness of God.

Jesus calls us: Ephphatha...to remain open to the possibilities for transformation through selfless love, for recreation enabled by humble generosity, for restoration brought about by perseverance and courage in the face of destruction. God is good...all the time. Let us be the same.