

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost B 08 September 2024

Mark 7:24-37

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*They brought to [Jesus] a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.'* Let's pray: ...

First, I'd like you to close your eyes and think about what's going on between Russia and Ukraine, Israel and the Middle East, and the current plight of women in Afghanistan. Now open your eyes and think about what you did when I mentioned those awful things. What did you do? Did you sigh?

To me, it all feels like déjà vu; like, "Here we go again; another year just like last year." We keep praying for peace on earth and goodwill to all men, but things only seem to get worse. Our sighs seem to speak louder than our words.

These days, I find myself sighing more often and more deeply. And I'm not talking about an, "Ahh, this is a lovely red" kind of sigh. I'm talking about the kind of sigh we hear from Jesus in today's gospel (Mark 7:34).

Today we hear of Jesus sighing. But, it's not just a sigh, it's a moan and a groan. It's a murmuring, an expression of frustration rising from deep within.

Jesus has returned to the region of Decapolis around the Sea of Galilee. The people bring him a deaf man with a speech impediment, and they beg Jesus to heal him. Jesus deals with the man privately, away from the crowd, and puts his fingers into his ears, and he spits and touches his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighs and says to him, 'Ephphatha,' which means, 'Be opened.'

Yes, Jesus sighed; more accurately, Jesus sighed deeply. What do you make of that? What's so extraordinary about Jesus sighing that St Mark found it worthy to include in his gospel account?

Maybe Jesus is just tired. Haven't you had days that wore you out and as soon as you got home you just flopped into your chair and sighed? Maybe you sigh when the phone rings or someone knocks on your door and you think, "Now what?" Maybe that's what happened to Jesus when the people brought this deaf man with a speech impediment. It could be that Jesus just needed a little down time; he just wanted to be left alone for a while. Or, what I believe is more likely, it could be that Jesus is heartbroken over the struggles and difficulties that have defined this man's life. Don't you sometimes watch the news and sigh? Israel, Afghanistan, Ukraine, migrants and refugees seeking a new home, political division, the high cost of living, housing unaffordability, public bickering. It's one sigh after another. And doesn't the lingering imposition of having to take a rapid antigen test before you can visit someone in aged care, feel like one elongated sigh?

\*Sigh\*

I must sigh often because Kathy will pick up on it and say to me, "Are you okay? What's on your mind?" Let me tell you what some of my sighs are about at the moment:

- I sigh when I'm tired, when I feel overwhelmed, and when I wonder if I have what it takes to keep going.
- I sigh about the things I desire and long for but don't have. I sigh when I'm frustrated, disappointed, discouraged, and especially when I'm exasperated.
- I sigh when I ponder the implications for our Church with the upcoming Convention of General Synod.
- I sigh when I think of Lila and Kingsley. They both died way too soon for me.
- I sigh when I think about the impact of the struggles that my family has faced since I agreed to test the call to study for and work in the public ministry of our beloved Church.
- I sigh when I read or hear our local and national conversations about autonomous rights, the abuse of police officers, teachers, nurses, and retail workers. I sigh when ideological agendas are given priority over basic human needs. I sigh because it doesn't make sense and I don't get it.
- I sigh when I catch myself slipping into old habits that aren't good for me or you. I sigh when I realise nothing has changed or is changing. I sigh when I begin to have the same old conversations and arguments in my head.

“Yep!” I’ve got the weight of the world on my shoulders.

\*Sigh\*

Okay, I’ve fessed up, so what about you? What causes you to sigh? Maybe you sigh at some of the same things I do. Maybe you’ve got other things that make you sigh. Maybe I make you sigh. I know that many of our footy teams are making us sigh this year (except you, Robert).

We sigh for many different reasons and on our own, we can easily let the state of things get us down. We can close ourselves off from the world. So, as always, Saints, we need Jesus to minister to us to open our ears, eyes, and hearts to the possibility of God’s grace and healing, even in our sighing. Maybe we should consider the possibility that something wonderful and life affirming happens when we sigh:

- What if our sighs are a revelation – an awareness, that we’ve bumped into a closed place within ourselves, a relationship, our life, and our world? Isn’t that what happened in today’s gospel? The people of Decapolis bring Jesus a man who is closed. His ears are closed and his tongue is tied. And Jesus sighs deeply.
- What if every one of our sighs exert the words, “Ephphatha, Be opened?”
- What if the breathing out that accompanies every sigh is the breath of life?
- What if Jesus is sighing new life into the man in today’s gospel, into you and me? Isn’t that the story of creation? God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). And for the man in today’s gospel, Jesus “sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ that is, ‘Be opened.’ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.” He was a new man, a new creation.

I think most of us experience our sighs as an acquiescence, a giving in to the situation. We sigh believing that how it is, is how it will always be. We close ourselves off from the possibility of something new happening. We resign from life. But Jesus shows us how to think about it differently.

His sigh isn't a resignation. It's his protest against anything that contracts or constricts life. It's his resistance to whatever is closed. It's his refusal to accept limitations or restrictions on the fullness of life. It is Jesus in perfect concert with the Holy Spirit who helps us when we lose our way... "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26; see also [1:22]).

When I examine the sighs in my life I see the closed places in me - my attitudes and opinions, my ways of thinking, my version of the truth, my actions, my dreams and hopes, my vision for how life should be. My sighs alert me to my self-interest, my inward focus. Thankfully, Jesus sees our despondency, Saints, takes us aside, and redirects our attention to his will for growth and healing.

"Ephphatha, Be opened?"

I wonder what it would be like for us to sigh together with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, not out of resignation, but to register our opposition, embolden our resistance, and reinforce our refusal to the closed places in our lives and world?

That sigh would be the deepest divine sigh, prayer, cry for help, expression of longing, desire, and hope. It just might be the opening of something new in our lives and world. It was for the man in today's gospel.

Let's try it. Think of something that causes you to sigh; something that makes you closed. Have you got something? Now take a breath. And sigh.

\*Sigh\*

"Ephphatha, Be opened."

Say it with me. "Ephphatha, Be opened."

Say it to someone sitting near you. "Ephphatha, Be opened." Pray it to God.

"Ephphatha, Be opened," that God may fill you with faith, hope, and love, in the name of the Father, and of the Son†, and of the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.