

Worshipping communities are not always harmonious. Some members feel they are the standard bearers for the traditions of the community and make it difficult for someone newer to be part of the church. When Mark wrote his Gospel, the Jewish Christians found it difficult to accept Gentiles. The old guard was steeped in the Jewish traditions and they did not want others to join the Christian community without embracing the Jewish ways. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus goes back and forth from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other. He teaches on the Jewish side and then goes to the Gentile side. Mark is trying to help the old guard welcome and embrace new members in the way that Jesus did.

In the Gentile district of the Decapolis, Jesus encounters a man who cannot hear and cannot speak. This is the experience of a Gentile in Mark's community who is attracted to Christ but cautioned not to speak or do anything other than first follow the Jewish traditions. The Gentile begs Jesus for help. Away from the crowd, Jesus gets up close and personal. "He put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, 'Ephphatha!' [that is in Jesus native language of Aramaic, "Be opened!"] (Mark 7:34). Several things are happening here:

- Jesus responds to the faith of the Gentile and heals his ills. He can now speak and hear clearly.
- Jesus is reaching out to the Jewish Christians, asking them to be open to welcoming new members and empowering them.
- The church's baptism ritual draws upon this Gospel Passage. After the baptism of an infant and following the lighting of the baptismal candle, the Ephphetha Rite takes place. The celebrant touches the ears and the mouth of an infant, saying, "The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the mute speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father." Since the sacrament of Baptism is usually administered before the entire congregation, the whole ritual implicitly invites the members to welcome the child as a new Christian.
- For adults entering the Church at the Easter Vigil, there is an optional Ephphetha Rite that takes place prior to baptism. Ephphetha is a powerful word that came from the lips of Jesus and is used to help the adult be enlightened with the gift of faith and emboldened to proclaim it.ⁱ

Following the miracle, Jesus orders the crowd not to tell anyone, but they can't help themselves and proclaim it far and wide (Mk 7:36). These Gentiles recognize the salvific mission of Jesus first foretold of by the Prophet Isaiah. They may not understand the historical context, but they certainly recognize the time of salvation as the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them (Mt 11:5, Is 26:19; 29:18–19; 35:5–6; 61:1).

As we ponder the meaning of today's Gospel for our own community, we must ask the question: What divisions are present in our community? How might the old guard be more open to those who are newer? How can we let the saving power of Christ bring us closer together and help us to overcome mistrust of one another?

ⁱ "The Ephphetha Rite," Pastoral Liturgy 45/2 (March/April 2014):11-13. (paulturner.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ephphetha.pdf)