

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

You may know the saying: “*getting old is not for the faint of heart.*” It’s often spoken with a bit of light-heartedness, but seasoned with a lived reality. The fact is, the longer we live, the more we experience pain. It doesn’t even have to be big pains or terrifying pains but we feel those nagging, physical pains.

Not that it’s the exclusive domain of aging: suffering, illness, death ... they are certainly with us in this life, and they cause many a crisis of the faith — anger, doubt, questions. How can I believe in a God who supposedly is all-powerful and good, yet who creates or causes or, at least, allows suffering ... things like deafness and speech impediments, or blindness, or cancer, or diabetes, or heart disease, etc.? Or accidents, destruction, death? These things are evil! How can an all-powerful, all-good God allow these things?

First, it’s important to affirm that God is not the creator of evil, and He is not its cause. Evil is something that is completely foreign to a holy God. When God created, He made all things good and very good. He did not make us so that we might suffer. He did not make us susceptible to sickness, and He did not make us so that we might die. Death was not a part of creation.

But Satan, an angel who himself had rebelled against God, had other plans for God’s good creation, and He found easy prey in Adam and Eve. Satan tempted Adam and Eve to sin, and by that sin — not by God’s action but by man’s — came sickness and death, toil and hardship, pain and suffering, and the creation groans still from this corruption (Rom. 8:22).

It’s not what God intended; it’s not what God made. God created life, not death; holiness not sin; perfection not sickness. But what God declared very good on the sixth day is not what we have now — now we experience evil, sin, and its consequences, death and decay, and we have them no matter how much we try to avoid them or slow them down or seek after a fountain of youth.

Such was the reality of the man — probably a Gentile — who was deaf and had a speech impediment, who was brought to Jesus in the region of the Decapolis to the east of Galilee. But that he was a Gentile didn’t matter to Jesus. He showed no partiality in dispensing His mercy. All that mattered to Jesus was that this man was suffering the consequences of sin — not necessarily from some specific sin of his own that he was bearing the consequences for, but the sin that has corrupted the whole world and that manifests itself in sickness, brokenness, and finally death.

We experience the same reality today. Think about our own congregation and the members and other people we know on our prayer list, all the brokenness and disease due to sin.

But we gather here today in church and we plead for them because, in the midst of the reality of these consequences of sin there is hope for us in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. The deaf and mute man must have had hope. That's why he was brought to Jesus and why his compatriots begged Jesus to lay His hands on him and heal him.

They knew that this was not right. *These disabilities were not a gift*, as those in the disabled community today often claim about their disability. Oh, to be sure, God can bring good out of an unfortunate situation, but that is not to say that the disability itself is good. God did not create us with disabilities, and we will not have them in the resurrection. Thus, this man's companions pleaded with Jesus as God in the flesh, for only God could make it right. Only God could heal him in body and soul.

And Jesus was not deaf to their cry for mercy. The incarnate Word of God, through whom all things were made, poked His fingers in the man's ears and spoke a word. It was a word not unlike His original creative words "*let there be ...*," but this time Jesus said, "*Ephphatha*," "*Be opened*." And it was so. The deaf man's ears were unstopped; He could hear the Word of God standing there before him.

But that's not all. Jesus also had spat and perhaps touched the man's tongue with His spittle — the text isn't clear about that. Anyway, the actions that Jesus did with the ears and tongue are interesting, to say the least, but it wasn't they that healed the man. It happened when Jesus said, "*Ephphatha*," "*Be opened*." Like in the beginning when God spoke and it was so, so also here: God's Son Jesus spoke, and this word opened the man's deaf ears and fixed the man's malfunctioning tongue, and he spoke plainly.

But more, the man's tongue was loosed to speak of the marvelous thing that Jesus had done. And the people's tongues, too, were loosed, all who witnessed these miracles. That's like the creation, too. God said: "*It was very good*" (Gen. 1:31), "*and all the sons of God shouted for joy*" (Job 38:7). Here in this re-creation the people confessed: "*He has done all things well*," and they zealously proclaimed it: "*the eyes of the blind [are being] opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ... the lame man [is] leap[ing] like a deer, and the tongue of the mute [is] sing[ing] for joy.*"

Dear saints, God is still at work today. He still hears our cries for help, our pleas for mercy, and He helps. He sends doctors and nurses, moms and dads — all kinds of people — to work in our lives to keep us alive and healthy and safe day after day (although they don't generally stick their fingers in our ears or touch our tongues with spittle). Modern medical miracles may not be miracles like Jesus did, but God works through means, and He shows us mercy through them.

But God does more through His Son ... He gives hope now surely, but especially for eternity. Jesus offers us the healing not simply of our bodies, but of our souls. Regarding our physical infirmities, we may be healed as God works through His instruments of compassion: doctors and nurses; on the other hand, it may not happen this side of the grave. But regarding our souls, the healing we need most, that is a healing that comes only from the Word, incarnate of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. It comes only from the fleshly Word who lived a life free from sin and yet became sin for us. The healing we need most comes most surely from God's servant, stricken and smitten by God, afflicted with the wounds of our sin, wounds in hands and feet and side.

We need the healing word of Christ's forgiveness because our consciences may be feeling a little guilty for being angry at God, for questioning His goodness, for doubting that His grace is sufficient for us. We need the word of grace commanded by Christ and connected to water that washes away our sin and creates faith in us; we need the word of absolution spoken by pastors as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven; we need the flesh and blood Word under bread and wine eaten and drunk that forgives sins, strengthens faith, and causes us to cling to Him and nothing else.

This Word of God, Jesus, and the words that he speaks, are our life and our hope, dear Christians. In the midst of things we do not understand, when we are in trial and heartache, when we are hurt and despairing, it is He and His word that will sustain us. For He has said, "*Ephphatha*," and opened our ears to hear His word of grace. He has said "*Ephphatha*," and loosed the tongue of your pastor to proclaim Him as God's Son, who came to save you. He has said "*Ephphatha*," and opened your hearts to believe this good news, and again, "*Ephphatha*," and opened your mouths to declare His praise.

So hear again His word and be comforted. There surely are no easy answers for those who are suffering and no quick fixes. And it's not going to get any easier as we get older. But we can trust this: the Word of God, Jesus, has taken all of our hurts and sorrows, all of our diseases and aches and pains, and has taken them into His holy wounds, wounds suffered for us on a cross, wounds from which even today flow the lifeblood of the Church — the forgiveness of our sins.

Therefore, believe this Word and come to His table. Eat His body wounded for you; drink His blood poured out for you; and trust: this is the medicine that heals you unto immortality.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.