

*Common Worship in Separate Places
For the people of Elmwood Avenue Presbyterian Church
London, Ontario
and their friends*

*The 15th Sunday after Pentecost
5 September 2021*

To cross the threshold into worship, light a candle and keep a moment of silence.

Opening Words

L: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,

P: and entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God most holy, your love made all that is. Your truth lives at the heart of all things. And by your grace you promise to perfect all that you have made. Lifting our voices before you, we gladly sing your praise. Lifting our hearts before you, we rejoice that you are God. Lifting our lives before you, we worship and adore you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Merciful God, in your presence we become aware of our need for your correction. We confess our evasion of it. Forgive the pride that turns us in upon ourselves. Forgive our deaf ears, muffled by our confusion. Open them to the sound of your voice. Turn our lives around. Correct our folly and forgive our failures. Then open our hearts to hear and believe the good news of the Gospel.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Holy One, in Christ you reveal your will to forgive, to heal, and to save. Open our ears to your redeeming word and move our hearts by the strength of your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "He has done all things well. He makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." May God grant us pardon, true repentance, and bring us to eternal life.

P: May the peace of Christ be with us all.

Prayer for Illumination Holy One, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 125 (*The Strength of God's Embrace*)

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
 which cannot be moved, but abides for ever.
 As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
 so the Lord surrounds his people,
 from this time on and for evermore.
 For the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest
 on the land allotted to the righteous,
 so that the righteous may not stretch out
 their hands to do wrong.
 Do good, O Lord, to those who are good,
 and to those who are upright in their hearts.
 But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways
 the Lord will lead away with evildoers.
 Peace be upon Israel!

(Said together) **Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen**

A Reading for the Day

St Mark 7:31-37 (*Jesus heals a deaf man*)

Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

They brought to him 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.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Mark 7:37 *"He makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."*

What would it be like never to hear a joke or tell one, never sing a song, tell a friend your trouble, or patiently listen to theirs – or never hear such excellent sermons as *this* one may turn out to be? It would be terrible. And terribly lonely.

Jesus wouldn't let this man's healing be a spectacle for gawking bystanders. He took him aside. Then, with a kindness that's far too rare in modern medicine, he explained the healing he was about to impart. But because the man was deaf, Jesus turned his words into gestures. He put his fingers in the man's ears. He spat and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven, to gather up the divine compassion that was in him all the time. He sighed, knowing this act of healing would expend his compassion and drain his vitality. Then he said a word out loud. St Mark's Gospel reports it in Aramaic, Jesus' native tongue: "*Ephphatha*, Be open."

That word reached into the deaf man. Taking a trail blazed by God's grace, it entered his listening *spirit*. He'd lived in solitary confinement, imprisoned by deafness. Jesus' word opened the door inside him. "*Open*," he said. "His ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly," says St Mark.

In the early Church, before someone was baptised, the priest would sometimes touch the person's ears and mouth and say that same word, "*Ephphatha*, be open", just as they were plunged beneath the water, Baptist-style.

Now, if someone threatened to thrust *our* heads under the water, we'd clamp our mouths, grab our noses, and hold our breath. We'd 'close down', in other words, lest we drown. But baptism is Christ's saving work *within* us, so it can't be about closing down. It's about 'opening up'. Salvation relieves our spiritual constipation. It cleanses the clogged passageways of the Spirit and throws open the locked door inside us. This salvation makes us more responsive to reality, not less; more flexible, not more rigid; and more attuned to God, the world, and each other;

We've got our religion wrong if we use it to blind and deafen us. When we look *away* from things because they upset us too much, we're not yet healed. Salvation gives us strength to face them. When we're deaf to someone's apology, we're not yet healed. Salvation gives us strength to forgive. And when we're too mute to say 'I'm

sorry', or to reveal who we really are, we're not yet healed. Salvation loosens our tongues to speak the difficult truths that lie within us, and to purge the lies that lie within us.

Jesus Christ opens a window to our souls that's been painted shut for too long, letting a gust of fresh air flow into their stuffy inner chambers. Dead things are stagnant and stale. But this feels like *life*. The air flows from without to within, and back again. We hear the music of nature again. The breeze brings us the sound of birdsong and the rustling of leaves in the trees. Our spiritual deafness wants this healing.

Israel's primal prayer is also an act of listening. You can find it in the Book of Deuteronomy. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might."

There are two 'commands' there. The second one is 'love' – "*Love* the Lord your God". But the first one is 'to hear', to listen, to be 'open'. Our souls want to breathe, to hear and speak, don't they? Human breath articulates itself in language and receives it as a meaningful sound – this *is* the breath of the spiritual life. It's why we place a premium on prayer and music and song. It's the mark of God's very image in us, our ability to hear words and to sing them. Language is God's gift to Adam and Eve. It's at the heart of every human community.

So, if we muffle the cry of the world all around us – whether it's nature's 'silent scream', other people's agony, our own hearts' moaning, or God's Word of judgment upon our sin, or God's Word of infinite mercy (the Word that Jesus turned into a gesture on the cross) – if we're deaf in any of these ways, we show our need for this healing.

And if we're mute, too afraid to speak our inconvenient truth, we show our need for healing too. Or when we drown out someone else's truth with our foolish opinions, we again show our need for healing. (Queen Victoria complained that her Prime Minister, William Gladstone, spoke to her as if she were a public meeting.) Or maybe we talk past each other in duelling monologues because I'm as deaf to *you* as you are to *me*. We both need healing.

When God heals of our spiritual deafness, we begin to hear other voices – the one we call 'conscience' (the guardian of our true selves), and the whispered voice of God, whose voice is so sovereign it can even correct our conscience. We know this voice the moment we hear it. It grips us, even when it hurts, even when we resist. We know we've heard it because it feels like the fresh breeze of reality. "This speaks to me," we say. "I get it. I can really hear now."

What happened? Healing happened. A jammed window was thrust open, and the truth we couldn't hear has breathed the fresh air of reality into our stagnant souls. A door long locked was sprung open, and the truth about we'd dared not speak we now have the courage to say out loud.

This is what happened to the man Jesus healed that day. "He ordered them to tell no one," says St Mark. But how can you tell a man who's just learned to talk *not to talk*? So does the community he can now take part in. "The more Jesus ordered them to tell no one, the more zealously they proclaimed it."

We're not made for loneliness and solitude. We have ears to hear and tongues to tell. We can ask ourselves, "What closed door does Jesus Christ need to open within me? What part of *me* is deaf to *him*?" *Ephphatha*. "Be open, and hear me" says Jesus. "Come alive in the world I came to save."

Prayers of Intercession

God of grace and glory, we offer the praise that is your due, for the gift of life and all its blessings, and we commit ourselves once more into your keeping.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Loving Lord, look upon your Church with mercy and with joy. We have gathered in your house to give voice to our common prayer and to hear your Word with joy. Confirm us in the truth of Jesus Christ and in the unity of his Body. Help us to hold fast the truth embedded in our faith, to live fully in these days, and to hope for a future fashioned by your grace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of wisdom, we pray for children who return to their schools this week. Give them a desire to learn the lessons of greatest worth. Keep them all healthy in body, strong in spirit, and curious in mind, that they may find wisdom, and learn of your purpose for their lives.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for teachers and school principals, administrators, and supervisors, and for those who clean and care for school buildings. Keep them safe and healthy. Give them fresh devotion to their calling, and a true respect for the communities they serve.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who suffer sorrow and pain in body, mind, or spirit. O Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you that out of suffering can spring compassion and caring, faith and endurance, and humility in knowing that you suffered too. We bring to you now, and name in our hearts, those known to us who are in any kind of need.....Give them healing, courage and hope. Let your peace be with them.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the poor and the oppressed: for victims of war and famine, victims of arrogant wealth and power run amok, for victims of climate devastation, both human and animal life, and for all who suffer from affliction or strife. O Lord, hear the cries that rise from earth to heaven, and show your mercy to people exhausted by suffering, who have seen too much death and endured too much loss.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Loving God, whose Son Jesus Christ opened the ears of the deaf and the lips of the mute, we commend to your compassion those who lack the powers of hearing and speech. Help them, by faith, hear the voice of your love speaking in their souls, and to sing your praise, joyfully, in the lives they live.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Eternal God, we give thanks for those who have died, for those who loved and served you in this world and hoped in you for the world to come. Give us a firm faith that nothing will separate us from your love in Jesus Christ our Lord...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God our Maker, from whom all things come and to whom all things return, give us such healing and strength that we may know your love and live with joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

As our Saviour Christ has taught us, so we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever. Amen

Benediction

(Said together) **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen**