

Peter Wiley  
 Mark 7:31-37  
 Hudson  
 CUPS  
 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity  
 1-25-07

SCRIPTURE: *Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by the 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."*

SERMON: I spent the summer of 1996 on sabbatical in Scotland where I would preach in three or four churches each Sunday. My wife and I flew out of JFK late on the first of May with our two young daughters . . . seated in the rear of the plane in the middle of a (AARP) tour group. My two year old cried from the moment we entered the plane until the moment we got off in Glasgow early the next morning . . .

- and the man behind me seemed to think she shouldn't be crying, or that I was the cause of the crying,
- or that I held the power to get her to stop . . .
- so he kicked the back of my seat repeatedly throughout the flight – as if to say: *Do something about your kid.*

Getting off the plane we gathered all our belongings for a summer's stay . . . piled it all into the car (my wife Amiee and two children in the back since we needed to put a suitcase on the front seat, since it wouldn't fit in the hatch that I had tied down with clothesline down with all our stuff hanging out. Getting on the M-8 heading towards Edinburgh, driving on the wrong side of the road without any sleep, snow still on the hills, my youngest still crying, and our five year old who decided this would be an opportune time to throw up, we arrived at our unheated fifteenth century laundry cottage in the hamlet of Spott that we would call home for the next few months. And in that moment, we knew we were out of our element. We knew we were in a foreign land.

The next morning I headed out early, map in hand, to find the church in the village of Innerwick. I got there and parked at the side of the lane. Tried the front door of the 700 year old church. It was locked – of course. Ten minutes later the sexton showed up and let me into the ancient unheated stone church. I asked him for the bulletin for the day. He gave me a blank look, so I said, "You know, the order of the service." Upon which he said: *You do that.* So with less than four hours sleep in the past 48 hours I launched into a service I created in the moment. Standing at the door greeting the twenty –three parishioners after worship, a

woman who appeared to be well into her eighties, grabbed my hand and said, *Acchh . . . I love the sermon son*. So feeling the first sign of hope that the summer wouldn't be a total disaster I asked her if it was the story I told about my church back home that she liked. And she looked back at me quizzically and after a moment said: *Oh son . . . I didn't understand a single word you said. I just loved your accent*. And in that moment, I knew I was out of my element.

As I think back on it though, it amazes me. We both spoke the same language. We came out of the same theological tradition. I even have a whole lot of Scottish blood. But I was unable to speak to her, and she was unable to hear me. On this last day of "the week of prayer for Christian Unity," I wonder how often that happens among us as people of common faith. I wonder how often it happens between denominations that have so much in common, but because of our little differences (some dunk in baptism and some dabble a little over the forehead, some drink from a common cup and some pass trays) . . . but because of our differences fail to hear one another. I wonder how often it happens even within our own little churches, where differences of opinion over right practices to achieve common goals cause us to go deaf.

Think of our gospel this morning. A deaf mute was brought to Jesus and Jesus was begged to heal him. So Jesus pulled the man aside . . . (I love this part), and he literally stuck his fingers in his ears. That's a strange image. It's as if something was blocking them. Something was keeping him from hearing that needed to be pierced, pushed out of the way. Then Jesus spit on his hand and touched the man's tongue (this is an odd medical practice). And then (this is the best part), Jesus sighed . . . as if he were frustrated with *all* the people's inability to hear each other . . . at their foolish unwillingness to just listen to each other – to take one another seriously (they were *all* deaf). And then Jesus said: *EPHPHATHA* – which in Aramaic (the common language of the people) means "be opened." And with the impediment removed from the man's ears . . . and his new ability to hear . . . he could now speak as well. Isn't that the case for us? Unless we can hear each other, we can never have any hope of speaking to each other.

I'm pretty confident that few things break God's heart more often than when we don't listen to each other. I think God does more than sigh . . . I think God weeps at the brokenness of the church, fragmented and splintering more each day. At the way we focus so intensely on those little things which separate instead of on the huge things that bind us together.

Did you see the State of the Union Address on Tuesday? It was a pretty touching moment to see the new speaker, Nancy Pelosi, say that it was her great honor to introduce the president of the United States. It sure looked like she meant it. And then to hear President Bush reply by saying that he had the high privilege and distinct honor of being the first president to begin the State of the Union message with the words: *Madam Speaker*. And it looked like he meant it too. The cynic in me says it was political posturing on both sides . . . but the person of hope within me says they were real gestures that offer promise. A promise that we will seek to find those great things we hold in common instead of that which separates.

It took me a little while to realize it, but what was amazing in my time in Scotland . . . was that it didn't matter if they understood my words. They welcomed me anyway. All that mattered to them was that I was a person of faith . . . and they embraced and loved me fully.

In the midst of this broken world so in need of healing . . . I'm sure that few things bring greater pleasure to God than when we do listen, than moments like this morning when we seek to bring together the many parts of the body of Christ, in those times when people of faith from a wide variety of traditions listen to one another with the hope of learning from our variety . . . and when we speak to each other in real love. That's when we are the true body of Christ.