



Sunday, September 8, 2024  
Mark 7:24-37 (Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Over the past few weeks, I've been noticing that people sigh...*a lot*. And I'm not talking about the sigh of relief that you make when you sink into the couch after an exhausting day at work, or the sigh of contentment that you let out after you've just finished stuffing yourself with Thanksgiving dinner. No, what I'm talking about is the groaning, annoyed, frustrated, disappointed kind of sigh. And I wonder if any of us here might be guilty of such sighing. Maybe some examples would help.

Do you sigh when people have a cart full of groceries and they use self-checkout? When someone is doing 10 miles an hour *under the speed limit* in the left lane? What about not having Wi-Fi or a cell phone signal? How about when people chew excessively loud? Or when someone takes *your* parking spot? When you're forced to change your password...*again*? When people are late? When people talk through movies? When someone blocks the entire aisle with their shopping cart? When someone puts an empty food or beverage container back into the fridge? When someone doesn't replace the toilet paper roll? Or how about when when you're in a hurry and the person ahead of you in the drive through has been there for 10 minutes but somehow isn't ready to order when it's their turn and you can hear them say, "*uhhhhh, ummmm, let me get a.....*"

I often hear my wife sighing, especially when she's asked me to do something like put clothes in the dryer before I go to bed and when she wakes up and asks me why they're not done and I say, "*Sorry I forgot because I fell asleep on the couch.*" Or when she asks me to do something important and it doesn't get done and I respond, "*When did you ask me to do that?*"

Last week I went to visit a church member whose health has recently been declining, and after we exchanged the usual greetings and chit chat I asked him, "*So how are you really doing?*" He sighed deeply before answering, "*I don't feel great, and I keep hoping the Good Lord has a better plan than this.*" I could hear his exhaustion and frustration. His sigh spoke louder and said more than his words. I know what that sigh is like, and I bet you do too.

I find *myself* sighing more these days. I sigh more often, and I also notice I sigh more deeply. And I wonder if that's true for you too. What kinds of things are you sighing about lately?

In today's gospel we hear that Jesus has returned to the region around the Sea of Galilee and the people there "*brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hands on him.*" Jesus took the man "*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.'*"

There's a lot going on in today's text – in fact not just one, but two healing stories. In the first, Jesus is seemingly being rude and refers to a Gentile woman as a dog after she begs him to cast a demon out of her daughter. And then in the second, we have Jesus taking a deaf man with a speech impediment aside and puts his fingers in his ears, spits and touches his tongue. Where do we even begin? Well today I want to talk about something that I think is easily overlooked when reading this text. It's just two words. And from my opener I think you can guess what it is. "He sighed." And the kind of sigh we hear from Jesus is not only a sigh, it's a moan and a groan. It's grumbling. It's an expression of something deep within. So, what are we to make of *that*?

Maybe he's just tired. Haven't you ever had a day that wore you out and as soon as you got home you dropped into a chair and sighed? Have you ever sighed when the phone or doorbell rang and you wondered, "*Now what?*" Perhaps that's what happened to Jesus when the people brought this deaf man with a speech



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impediment. Maybe he just wanted to be left alone for a while. Or maybe he's heartbroken at this man's life – the difficulty and the struggle. Don't you sometimes watch the news and sigh? Ukraine, Gaza, hurricanes, wildfires, corruption, racism, political division, or the violence that just took place at a school in Georgia. It's one thing after another – one sigh after another.

Let me tell you about some things causing me to sigh these days:

I sigh when I'm tired, when I feel overwhelmed, and when I wonder if I have what it takes. I sigh when I feel powerless, when I don't know what to do, and when I feel lost. I sigh when our kids come to me looking for help with difficulties they're experiencing and I can't do enough to make things better for them. I sigh when I think of the people in this church that God has called me to love for and they get sick, struggle in relationships, receive a difficult diagnosis, or face challenges that push them to the edge of what they can handle. I sigh about the things I desire and long for but don't have. I sigh when I'm frustrated, disappointed, or discouraged. I sigh when I listen to our local and national leaders and their agendas are given priority over people. I sigh when I look at our world and realize nothing has changed or not enough is changing and it feels like I'm having the same conversations and arguments over and over again.

*SIGH!* 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. We sigh for a thousand different reasons but here's what I wonder. What if our sighs are the revelation and recognition that we've bumped up against a closed place within ourselves, in a relationship, or in our life and world? After all, isn't that exactly what happened in today's gospel? The people of that region brought Jesus a man who is closed. His ears are stopped up and his tongue is tied. And Jesus sighed.

And what if every sigh were to carry the word that Jesus follows with, "Ephphatha which means, Be opened?" What if the exhalation, 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, and into you and me? And isn't that the very story of creation? From the book of Genesis in chapter 2, *"then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."*

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 a resignation to our circumstances. We sigh believing that's just how it is, or how it will be. We close ourselves off from the future, each other, and the possibility of something new happening. We resign from life. But, good thing for us, Jesus doesn't do that. That's because his sigh is not a resignation. It's expressing his opposition to anything that would diminish life. It's his resistance to whatever is closed. It's his refusal to accept limitations or restrictions on the fullness of life.

When I look at the sighs in my life I can 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 might be. My sighs show me that I still have work to do, and they point me to places of growth and healing.

What tops the list of things you're sighing about these days? What closed places are they showing you? What would it take for you to sigh at those closed places and then say, "Ephphatha, Be opened?"



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I wonder what it would be like for you and me to sigh together, and not out of resignation, but to express our opposition, to embolden our resistance and reinforce our refusal to the closed places in our lives and our world?

I think that sigh would be a divine sigh, a prayer, a cry for help, an expression of longing and desire, a hopeful expectation. It just might be the opening of something new in our lives and our world. It certainly was for the deaf and mute man in today's gospel.

*SIGH!* "Ephphatha, Be opened." Say it to yourselves. Offer it to one another. Pray it to God. Amen.