

Pax Christi USA Virtual National Conference  
The Closing Mass, September 7, 2024  
Bishop John Stowe's Homily

It is when we recognize and deeply appreciate our role as the Body of Christ, gathered in worship around the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist, that we can find the strength and wisdom to resist the polarization and enmity so prevalent in our time. We remember Jesus, who spanned the chasm between divinity and humanity and reveals both perfectly. He who reveals most perfectly the very love that is the source of our creation also, in love, accepts the harshest consequences of our rejection of that love. In the polarized religious and political context of his day, Jesus did not resist a death by capital punishment which required cooperation between his own people and the Roman government. He went to his gruesome death begging forgiveness for those who were killing him, and he rejected the suggestion that he take the easy way and demonstrate might and power; he was faithfully resolute in taking the harder way of love that it might lead to true reconciliation.

Our response to the incivility and outward violence of this moment in history cannot be to take another shortcut and pretend all is well, or to wait it out, or even to act as if all is well. It is nothing new for us to have to choose between two flawed individuals or two political parties that have strayed from the pursuit of the common good and who fail in very significant ways to affirm the value and dignity of human life, especially the lives most in danger.

Nonetheless, choose we must. And a false equivalency between the danger that each presents is indeed a danger itself. While the Church as a body does not endorse candidates nor tell members how to vote, we have failed mightily as teachers of the faith if we think that someone convicted of sexual violence and a host of other felonies, who seems incapable of speaking the truth in nearly any circumstance, who mocks and ridicules vulnerable human beings, and who thinks the concept of laying down one's life is for "suckers and losers".... to think that such a person could be the leader of the free world and is a viable candidate. When the opponent works valiantly for the expansion of abortion rights, we have reason to be conflicted and saddened that a serious and complex moral issue can be the source of a rallying cry – but we have to choose to ignore and deny too much to forge an equivalency between the two.

What does the Word of God say to us tonight to enlighten and challenge us on the path of discipleship, as we re-commit ourselves to pursue the way of peace? A deaf man with a speech impediment is brought to Jesus, way off in the borderlands – there are crowds seeking Jesus, even in these out of the way places where pagans lived, they are still bringing people to encounter Jesus, to be healed by his touch. We know well that hearing and speech are closely related, and it is not uncommon for those who are unable to hear to also be unable to speak, or to speak with difficulty.

Deafness, like blindness and other disabilities, in the Bible are often more than physical realities. Although Jesus rejects the idea that such disabilities are a result of one's sinfulness, this doesn't mean that those who have such disabilities are immune to sin. Remember the story of the paralyzed man who was carried by his friends on a stretcher and lowered through the roof into a house where Jesus was? Jesus scandalized the witnesses by proclaiming the man's sins pardoned before healing his paralysis. The gospel makes no suggestion of the deaf man's sinfulness, but physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being are very inter-related in the biblical world – and we continue to discover their interrelationship even now.

Because the gospel pericopes are never only about a story from the past, I think we are meant to reflect on our own deafness and speech impediments. In fact, I believe we are living in a world plagued with hearing problems, or better yet, listening problems, which often renders our speech unintelligible. On multiple occasions, Pope Francis has called us to be a listening church: he told us that we cannot be a teaching church if we are not first a listening church; without hearing our words of instruction are impaired. In the synodal process which the church is still learning, the first step, and a step that must be repeated again and again, is the step of listening.

How many parents have heard the refrain from their teenagers, “are you even listening to me?” And of course, the parents ask their kids the same question. The Church is often accused of having lots of answers to questions no one is asking. And when we wonder why we have not been more effective at evangelizing, or in implementing our social teaching, or in proclaiming God's mercy – it comes down to a certain deafness. Think about our treatment of transgender persons or any of the LGBTQ community, we have pronouncements about intrinsic disorder before we have encountered the person, the story, the experiences that the person has, and their longing for love and fulfillment.

As members of Pax Christi, we know very well how the gospel of non-violence goes unheard as we opine about what Ukraine or the Palestinians need in time of attack and war. People who are working for the prevention of suicide, who have designated this weekend as the time when churches are asked to discuss the issue and make a plea for people to find help, know that too often a person who takes their own life feels unheard, unloved, or even invisible. While the single most effective way to prevent a suicide is for a struggling person to hear that he or she matters to somebody, that somebody cares about them. Our deafness sometimes creates the speech impediment that makes it difficult to say those basic words.

With touch and gestures for the deaf man, Jesus lets out the loud groan “Ephphatha” – “Be opened” and of course the man's ears were opened and his speech impediment removed.

Do we hear Jesus calling out “Ephphatha” when it comes to our unwillingness to hear the gunshots in classrooms and our inability to enact sensible gun control?

Do we hear Jesus' "Ephphatha" when people of color can't seem to be heard in the legislature when asking for the restoration of voting rights, or in the courts when asking for justice, or in society when asking for an even playing field?

Do we hear Jesus' "Ephphatha" when we are unable to hear the cries of those escaping violence, crushing poverty, and death pleading for asylum at our borders?

Do we hear Jesus' "Ephphatha" when it comes to people who are crying out for healing when medicine and healthcare are priced beyond their reach?

Do we hear Jesus' "Ephphatha" when we can't hear the cries of wounded and dying children and suffering people in Ukraine, in Gaza, in Sudan, in Israel, in Myanmar, in Congo?

Do we hear Jesus' "Ephphatha" as we seem indifferent and unaffected by the expulsion of priests and sisters from Nicaragua?

Jesus is trying to place his fingers in our ears and to loosen our tongues.

The prophet Isaiah described the saving action of Jesus in today's Gospel centuries earlier when describing God's vindication of the suffering and God's recompense. While the concepts of vindication and recompense may sound punishing, harsh, and violent to our ears – God's vindication is with healing love, with inclusion, with mercy.

Let us long for that healing strength and peace that casts out fear. Let us heed the instruction of the Apostle James and pay less attention to the man with gold rings and fine clothes – including the one from Mar-a-Lago – and pay attention to the ones in shabby clothes, whose voices are drowned in the noise, whose homes have been destroyed by bombs and armies, whose children have been silenced by AR15s.

May we hear the prophetic message to those whose hearts are frightened: *Be strong fear not, here is your God!*