

## WHAT DID YOU SAY?

As I was reflecting on this morning's reading from Mark's Gospel, I thought a lot about the man who was brought to Jesus because he was deaf and could hardly talk.

It must be awful to be unable to communicate with others.

It has to be incredibly frustrating to not be able to hear what people are trying to say to you, and to not be able clearly express what you're trying to say to another person.

Especially if you love that person, and you want to clearly communicate that love.

Or that person is deeply hurt, and you want to speak words of comfort to them.

Or you have wronged that person, and you want to tell them you're sorry.

But we don't have to have actual hearing loss or a speech impediment to be unable to communicate with others.

We can cause our own deafness, when we close our ears to others when they're speaking to us.

And we can cause our own speech impediment when we speak to someone without giving much thought to what we're saying, and we casually throw around words that do more harm than good.

I remember times when I was a kid, sometimes I would get angry or upset with my mother and say something inappropriate to her. And she would respond, "What did you say?"

I wonder how many times that man who was brought to Jesus said those words, at least to himself, because he was deaf and couldn't hear what someone was trying to talk to him?

"What did you say?"

How many times had those words been spoken to him by someone who couldn't understand what he was saying because of his garbled speech?

"What did you say?"

When I became a parish minister, I discovered pretty quickly that church people are notorious for their inability to hear what someone is telling them, or to effectively communicate what they want to say to someone else.

I've found that congregations can suffer from either a lack of communication, or an abundance of miscommunication.

Sometimes when members of the Body of Christ speak, they have the facts wrong.

Or sometimes they don't have the facts at all, but instead of waiting until they do have them before they speak, they make up their own facts.

And as the miscommunicated word gets around the church, people shake their head in bewilderment and reply, "What did you say?"

This inability or unwillingness to communicate with one another can cause damage to the Body of Christ. At the very least, it can impede the church's mission to make Jesus Christ known in the world.

Two movers were struggling with a huge and very heavy crate, trying to get it through the doorway.

After a strenuous but futile effort, they were exhausted. As they set the crate down, one of them said, "I give up. We'll never get this thing in here."

"In there?" said the other one. "I thought we were trying to get it out!"

Those movers weren't hearing one other. They weren't speaking clearly to one another. And as a result, the work they were called to do together wasn't getting done.

The same thing can happen in congregations.

If only there was a way to take those church people who can't or won't listen to what is being said to them, or are unable or unwilling to speak to others in an appropriate and constructive way, and bring them to Jesus.

And we could beg Jesus to put his hand on them and heal them of their affliction.

Now, I know that churches aren't perfect. The Body of Christ is made up of imperfect, flesh-and-blood human beings. A man once wrote to *Dear Abbey* and complained that he no longer attended church because it was full of hypocrites. Abbey responded to him, "The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints."

Yes, churches aren't perfect because people aren't perfect. And one of the big areas that church people can strive to grow and improve as Christians is communication.

Perhaps the most effective way churches can communicate, maybe even more effectively than talking and listening to each another, is with our actions.

I imagine that the man who was deaf and could hardly talk had other ways of communicating and being communicated with. Before Jesus healed him, he probably expressed what he wanted to say by what he did.

And others could communicate to him by what they did. Their actions spoke volumes. Just like a picture, that someone once said is worth a thousand words.

Once there was a little girl named Laura, sitting quietly at the kitchen table, fully absorbed in a project she was working on. Every once in a while she would ask how to spell the name of someone in the family, then painstakingly form the letters, one by one.

Next, she would add flowers with small green stems, complete with grass drawn on the bottom of the page. She finished off each drawing with a sun in the upper right hand corner, surrounded by an inch or two of blue sky. Holding them up to take a close look at them, she let out a long sigh of satisfaction.

"What are you making, Honey?" her mother asked.

Laura glanced at her brothers before she looked back at her. "It's a surprise," she said, covering up her work with her hands.

Next she taped the top two edges of each sheet of paper together, trying her best to create a cylinder. When she had finished, she disappeared up the stairs with her treasure.

It wasn't until later that evening that the mother noticed a construction paper mailbox taped to the doors of each of the family members' bedrooms. There was one for Laura's brothers, Steve and Tom. And she hadn't forgotten her parents, or her baby sister Jill, who was only a few months old.

For the next few weeks, everyone received mail on a regular basis. There were little notes expressing her love for her parents and siblings. There were short letters full of compliments that only a seven-year-old would notice. Mom was in charge of retrieving baby Jill's letters, which were page after page of colored scenes, including flowers with happy faces.

"She can't read yet," Laura whispered. "But she can look at the pictures."

That's one possible solution to the lack of communication that churches can fall victim to.

When we become "deaf" to what others in our congregation are saying; when we can "hardly talk" and our words become misunderstood or taken the wrong way, maybe we can draw pictures for others of what a Christ-centered life looks like, by our actions.

Maybe we can illustrate what it is to be a Christian and a member of the church with acts of love, as we strive to be Christ for one another.

Because then, even if they can't hear our words or understand what we're saying, or their emotional maturity is closer to that of a 3 year old than an adult, they can look at the colorful pictures that we create by our Christ-like deeds, and show them by what we do what it is to be followers of Jesus.

And maybe they won't need to ask, "What did you say?"

Thanks be to God. Amen.