

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible, a lighted candle, and a vase with water at the center of your group. Give each person a flower. Welcome one another without speaking and make a bouquet of flowers.

LEADER: Our brother James asks us in Sunday's second reading to suppose that a richly-dressed man with gold jewelry on his hands and around his neck comes into our group and at the same time a poor person in shabby clothes walks in—where should we seat them among us?

ALL: Who is poor and who is rich in God's eyes?

LEADER: Who sees signs of God among us? Who hears God's word and acts upon it?

ALL: Let it be us. Open our ears to hear and our eyes to see. Loosen our tongues to nourish one another with our words.

Twenty-four hours times sixty minutes per hour equals 1,440 minutes in a day. For only two of those minutes does the average person get listened to with attention and depth, according to research I read.

Who listens to us actively, hears our words, reads our faces, senses our feelings, and encourages us to complete our thoughts and stories? Who pauses their own thoughts long enough to listen? Are most of us as deaf as the man whose friends bring him to Jesus in the gospel?

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SUNDAY by SUNDAY

Today we can text rather than talk, which raises new questions? How deep does texting take relationships? What am I missing if I don't text? Can we make and keep friends any better with our thumbs than our ears? Am I more or less isolated from others in my life?

Feminist Nell Morton urged women "to listen one another into speech." Attentive listening affirms others' worth and draws their experience into words. Unsorted, undervalued impressions and memories become words spoken aloud that we can shape into sentences and concepts that express feelings, learnings, purpose, intentions. In sharing across the boundaries of our separate selves, we can thin the space between us.

Our community has done side-by-side partner conversations in which one person responds to a question for 15 or 30 minutes

without interruption. The question invites serious sharing, such as: What motivates you to do justice work? How did you decide to be a nurse? The listener can only speak if the partner stops and then can ask only prompting questions. Then the partners reverse. I remember well the five people to whom I've listened in this exercise.

My sister Jan lived the miracle in Sunday's gospel. When by two she hadn't learn to talk, our parents took her to the ear doctor, who discovered she had almost no hearing in one ear and less than half in the other. Jan used her eyes to hear by lip reading. Mother practiced phonics with her until she spoke quite clearly.

● Who has listened you into speech?



GOSPEL

Jesus opens the ears of a man who is deaf.

NARRATOR 1: Jesus returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Decapolis. Some people brought to him a man who was deaf and who had an impediment in his speech.

NARRATOR 2: They begged Jesus to lay his hand on him. Jesus took him aside in private away from the crowd and put his fingers into his ears. He spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed and said—



JESUS: Ephphatha.

NARRATOR 1: This word means “Be opened.” Immediately the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

NARRATOR 2: Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure.

PEOPLE: He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.

Mark 7:31-37

Jesus calls us to continue his mission.

His lack of hearing separates the man who is deaf from his society. He experiences the world as silent. Worse, his deafness impedes his speech and silences his voice in the conversation of the human community. These challenges marginalize the man and leave the seeing of his eyes and the commitments of his heart without words.

Yet, this man communicates. He has friends. His friends beg Jesus to lay his hand on him. When Jesus says, “Be opened,” he opens the man’s ears to human conversation and gives him voice.

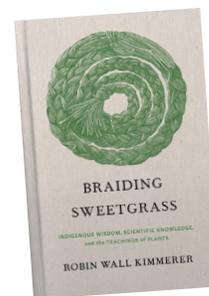
In fact, as events turn out, the miracle sets this man, who

is a Gentile, free to participate fully in Jesus’ mission. When Jesus loosens his tongue and calls him into speech, he cannot be silenced nor can his friends. They will not keep Jesus’ healing power secret. They tell everyone the amazing healing the man has experienced.

This miracle story shows us in cameo that God wants wholeness and freedom for people. It shows Jesus reaches out to include the marginalized. It invites us to identify who is silent in our society.

- When have words failed you?
- When have others silenced you?

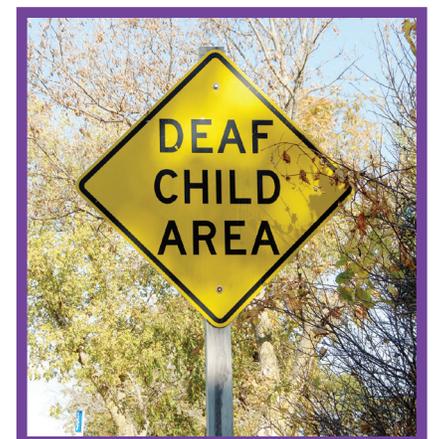
Like a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, immigrants face profound hearing and speaking problems. Without the same language, they cannot hear ideas, let alone make sense of new customs, dress, or civic systems. On the other hand, without our knowing immigrants’ languages, we don’t learn from the richness of the cultural backgrounds they bring to their new homeland.



Robin Wall Kimmerer braids together her scientific knowledge and the learning of her native people in her book *Braiding*

Sweetgrass. She is a botany professor. When she decides to learn Ojibwe, a language close to her native Potawatomi, Kimmerer discovers the spirituality the language embodies.

Ojibwe is seventy percent verbs. In her dictionary Kimmerer finds Saturday defined as *to be a Saturday*. The word *bay* means *to be a bay*, alive with shore, bird, flowers,



breezes, trees. The word carries the living spirit of all that interacts to make a Saturday or a bay.

In another chapter Kimmerer takes a class to explore a bog and presents the wetlands as a grocery store for their meals. Cattails are a sacred staple. In Potawatomi the word *cattail* means *we wrap the baby in it*; in Mohawk it means *the cattail wraps humans in her gifts*. Earth teaches a spirituality of generosity and gratitude in this language.

Reading this chapter, I flashed to my niece Jessie's students in her English Language Learner classes. Her first graders come from refugee families—Karen people from Myanmar (Burma) and children from Somalia in Africa, 34 countries in the school. What spirituality do their families leave behind to bring their children to safety? What spirituality will they learn with English, a language that turns the world into nouns?

The deaf man in the gospel is a Gentile. What is the language he has never heard or spoken? Koine Greek? Aramaic. He and his friends go forth speaking the language of Jesus' good news.

- Who have you listened into speech?
- What challenges have you experienced refugees and immigrants having?
- What spirituality does your language carry?

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Who do you notice in our public life has too little voice in decisions made about them? What might your group do to convene a conversation for hearing the unheard about their needs?
- Who has too little voice in Church life? How might you facilitate conversation among those who rarely listen to each other?

Jesus pays profound attention to the man who is deaf. Jesus uses his senses. He listens to the man's friends with his ears and hears the man's story. Jesus sees the man with his eyes and takes him aside. Jesus puts his fingers in the man's ears and touches them. From his own mouth Jesus spits and touches the man's tongue. From his mouth Jesus speaks words of healing, "Be opened."

This miracle story not only shows Jesus healing the man with divine power but attending

to the man with his human hands. The Second Vatican Council reminds us that "by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, he acted by human choices, and he loved with a human heart" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #22).

Jesus uses his human gifts in healing the man. Our ears like his can listen to human needs. Our eyes like his can see people on the margins. Our minds can imagine ways to draw people fully into the human family. What Jesus does with human hands reveals the love we can give with ours.

- To whom can you bring healing?
- What miracles are you committed to working today?

Secrecy is a major theme in Mark's gospel. Jesus urges the man with newly-opened ears and loosed tongue to keep secret who he is. But this man is one of four people in Mark's gospel who tells the secret. None of the four have



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names. Each comes to Jesus in need of healing.

Two are Gentiles—the man in this Sunday’s gospel and the Gerasene demoniac from whom Jesus cast out a legion of demons (Mark 5.1-20). Two are Jews—the leper in Mark 1.40-45 and the woman with the hemorrhage who overcomes her fear to proclaim the whole truth of her healing in the midst of a crowd of people (Mark 5.33). These four anonymous believers model for Mark’s hearers in A.D. 70 the response he wants from a new generation and from us.

In Mark’s gospel those in the best position to tell the secret of Jesus’ healing, freeing love and his messianic identity—Jesus’ disciples—never tell the secret. In history, of course, they do become preachers of Jesus’ good news. But by the time Mark writes the first eyewitnesses have been put to death, died, or grown old. Mark keeps them silent in his narrative to call a new generation of preachers to voice from among his hearers.

- What irrepressible things do you have to say no matter who tells you to keep them quiet? What call do you hear in these words?
- What is your most irrepressible Christian conviction?
- What convictions do people not know you have?

FIRST READING

Isaiah envisions wholeness for humankind.

Isaiah 35 envisions God’s restoration of Jerusalem after the exile. Return to Jerusalem, its ruins home only to jackals, must have seemed an utopian dream to Israelites in exile. By 539 BCE, when Second Isaiah prophesies, they had lived in exile for nearly two generations and prospered.

Second Isaiah draws on ancient images of God as the divine warrior who will avenge Israel and restore them as a people. God is a powerful warrior who will lead Israel through the wilderness as once God led Israel’s ancestors through the sea.

God is creator whose coming makes the desert bloom and the blind, deaf, lame, and silent whole. Blooming, healing, and joy are signs of the coming of Israel’s God, signs of the messiah.

Second Isaiah’s vision

Say to those who are of a fearful heart;
“Be strong. Do not fear!
Here is your God.
God will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
God will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless shall shout for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand will become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water.

Isaiah 35.4-7

- What is your vision of wholeness for the human race today? What are its signs?

PRAY

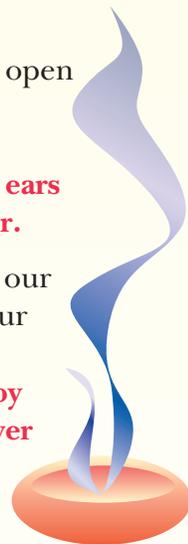
Decide on a commitment to make the human community where you live flourish in some small way this week. Each person announces his or her commitment and takes one of the flowers as a sign of this commitment.

LEADER: Jesus, you open our eyes to see our neighbors.

ALL: You open our ears to hear one another.

LEADER: You loose our tongues to speak our truth.

ALL: Let us bring joy and healing wherever we can.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.

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