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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, October 4, 2023
Matthew 9:27-34
Pity Those Who Cannot Speak

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 9:27-34, RSV
*In last week's reading, Jesus restored a twelve-year old girl to a life. Now he
heals a man who is unable to speak.*

²⁷And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, "Have mercy on us, Son of David." ²⁸When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." ²⁹Then he touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith be it done to you." ³⁰And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly charged them, "See that no one knows it." ³¹But they went away and spread his fame through all that district.

³²As they were going away, behold, a dumb demoniac was brought to him. ³³And when the demon had been cast out, the dumb man spoke; and the crowds marveled, saying, "Never was anything like this seen in Israel." ³⁴But the Pharisees said, "He casts out demons by the prince of demons."

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this evening is that happy verse about the man who could not speak. It goes this way:

³³And when the demon had been cast out, the dumb man spoke; and the crowds marveled, saying, "Never was anything like this seen in Israel." (Matthew 9:33, RSV)

Pity the one who lacks the human power of speech. I read a book once by a man who was born into a family where both mother and father were born deaf. The writer himself was not deaf, but was born into a family in which his parents spoke, but they spoke by way of sign language. His father worked in the production office of a big city newspaper. He worked there along with other deaf people. The newspaper liked to hire deaf people to work on the production line because the job was so noisy. The noise of the machines was so loud that it was dangerous to people with normal hearing. So, his father had a good career there.

But the father had one terrible fear about working on the production line. He feared an industrial accident in which his hands would be mangled. He feared this because he used his hands to speak. The author said that his father and mother were eloquent with their hands. They could express anything

they wanted with their hands. They could kid one another with their hands. They could express love. They could express sorrow. They could carry on in life fine, expressing well all the depth of human feelings available to them by way of language — their language being sign language.

But oh! What a sorrow it would have been for the hands of father or mother to have been mangled. Such an accident would have cast them into a world of futility in trying to express themselves. It would have been a real heartache.

Such was the world of the man in today's Gospel story. He was bound by a demon so that he could not speak. Our text refers to him as a "dumb demoniac," but, of course, the word "dumb" here does not mean unintelligent, but rather, incapable of speaking. The man might have been very intelligent. He might have been a poet. If he could speak, he might have been a great orator or preacher. But he is held back. The demon will not let him speak. And that is a deep kind of suffering for a human being: to be unable to speak.

Jesus cast out that demon. Jesus loosed the tongue of that poor man. And so we read our happy line:

³³And when the demon had been cast out, the dumb man spoke; (Matthew 9:33, RSV)

It is a hopeful line not only for all the people in our world who are unable to speak, but also for those of us who wish we could speak better. Some of us continually say to ourselves, "I wish I had said that, but I was too slow. The moment passed. But I sure wish I had been able to express myself better then." We human beings differ in extraordinary ways in our verbal abilities. I like to think that today's Gospel story is a foretaste of the New Jerusalem in which everyone can speak beautifully.

But the Pharisees in today's story can speak, but they use their words to give the worst possible interpretation of what Jesus has done. They do not praise Jesus for his miracle, but rather claim that he did it by way of "the prince of the demons." Now, I do not know whether this is possible. I do not know whether the prince of the demons *can* do such a good deed as healing a man unable to speak. I do not know whether demons can do good deeds at all. But setting that aside, I am quite sure of one thing: These particular Pharisees failed to give a charitable interpretation of the deeds of Jesus. And therefore, it would have been better for these Pharisees if they had not spoken. It would have been better for them if *their* tongues had been bound — at least for a while — so that they could have been kept from bearing false witness against Jesus. For that is what they did. They broke the Eighth Commandment as we Lutherans count the Commandments. They broke the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Ex 20:16, KJV)

Many of can speak. We should be grateful for that ability. And we should be grateful for the hope that one day, in God's Kingdom, Jesus will help us to speak even better. Meanwhile, in this earthy life, let us try to take even better charge of our tongues. St. James says that the tongue can be like a fire. His words are stark, even frightening. Here they are in the King James Version:

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. (James 3:6, KJV)

Our ability to speak is a noble gift given to us by our Maker. Let us use that gift to help our neighbors and in service to Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.