

I CAN'T HEAR! ARE YOU LISTENING?

By Bishop Fritz Mutti

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There was a prophet named John. In the desert of Judea near the Jordan River, he announced that the kingdom of heaven was drawing near. Many responded to this message and John baptized them in the waters of the river. One who came to be baptized was his cousin Jesus. When John protested, Jesus said, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness."

So, Jesus was baptized, and it was like a commissioning to begin ministry. He called twelve disciples, and he taught them what righteousness looked like. When Jesus finished teaching his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach, preach and heal in the villages. His teachings inspired those who came to hear him. And many were moved to bring their sick and disabled to Jesus for healing.

I

Our text today is found in the Gospel of Mark 7:31-37. You heard it read a few minutes ago. Let me tell you what took place again:

Jesus was teaching at several places in the region of Galilee. One day "some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly speak, and they begged him to place his hand on the man for healing. "Jesus did touch the man by putting his fingers in the man's ears and he said, "Open up." At once the man's ears opened. The man was healed.

I can identify with this story because of my own personal journey with hearing loss. I am guessing that many of you have a similar experience.

About twenty-five years ago, I began to notice that I was having trouble with my hearing. Etta Mae, my wife, was aware of it more than I because I had to ask her to repeat many things. She would ask if I was listening to her.

We were living in Kansas in those days, so on the recommendation of a friend we went to an audiologist at the University of Kansas to be tested. In those tests, my loss of hearing was confirmed, and I got my first set of hearing aids.

About six or seven years later, I found myself saying again, "I can't hear you." Now others were saying, "Are you listening?"

When I retired in 2004, I was invited to teach at Saint Paul School of Theology. I loved the students, and I loved the experience of teaching. Sometimes I taught in a lecture hall, and I discovered that I could not hear students on the back rows. That, of course, was where they loved to sit. I found that I needed to announce at the beginning of the course that I was having trouble hearing, and I asked the students to sit closer to the front. Of course, they still preferred to sit in the back. I finally decided I would have to give up teaching because I could not hear.

I got a new set of hearing aids every four years or so, but I had to admit that I still could not hear what people were saying to me. My loss of hearing has progressed so much since we moved to John Knox Village that ETT insisted I have my hearing tested again. This time I learned that my hearing was so impaired I could be classified as legally deaf.

Regretfully no travelling preacher was available to heal. I did come in contact with a doctor, however, who referred me to an audiologist who completed an evaluation to see if Medicare would cover the cost of the implantation of a cochlear device. Unfortunately, I do not qualify. Nonetheless, I still believe the living Christ is guiding the physicians who are leading me through this process. I will pursue other possibilities toward improved hearing.

Each morning at the breakfast table, we read a daily devotion. A while back, the author wrote about her brother who was born with a hearing disability. She said that the family members needed to be attentive to each other, and the brother needed to ensure his ear was "inclined" to them.

The devotion then turned to Psalm 86 which opens with this plea to God: "Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me....Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul." Real communication and healing requires a back-and-forth. The words, "I can't hear." and "are you listening?" go together. The psalmist assures us that God is listening. The relationship occurs when we are actively listening for God's answer.

The deaf man asked Jesus for the gift of healing and Jesus heard his request. When we face illness, disability and other kinds of trouble we can be assured that God hears us. Are you listening?

II

Let's think about Jesus' ministry of teaching, preaching and healing in a different way. Word got around about what Jesus was doing. John and his disciples remembered the day Jesus came to be baptized and they wondered who this person really was. "(John) sent word by his disciples to Jesus asking, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?'"

"Jesus responded, 'Go, report to John what you hear and see. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them.'" (Mark 11:2-6)

Our lives are lived in a world much different from the place and time that Jesus carried out his ministry. Now we are concerned to respond to health needs on a global scale. Millions are affected by terrible diseases like Ebola, malaria, and HIV/AIDS.

Since the AIDS pandemic began, Etta Mae and I have been working as educators helping persons to understand the nature of this death dealing disease. We have also served as advocates for those living with AIDS and for their family members. We know

that many of those infected cannot hear the truth about AIDS because they were stigmatized, blamed and blocked from listening by the cultures of which they are a part.

Here is a story about health work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo:

Francine Kasongo, a 34-year-old single mother of two suffered for several years without really know why. She thought perhaps her ill health was caused by her own bad luck, so she left her children and spent a year working in the house of a healer or prophet. But she found there no diagnosis and no cure for her illness.

Fortunately for Kasongo, community health workers in the Kamina Health Zone were distributing information about HIV/AIDS. The teams go out in pairs to educate the public through community-based organizations. With financial support from a Christian organization, health workers have been able to spread information about this disease, helping people understand, if left untreated, it causes death, leaving many children without their parents....

Kasongo listened to what the workers said and she learned that HIV/AIDS is not a curse, but a disease. She also heard the workers say that she could live longer and continue her normal routine if she agreed to be examined and treated, which she did. Since starting her treatment in October 2016, she has regained her health and returned to her daily activities. In addition, she became part of a program known as “mother mentors” and now helps other women living with the disease in their recovery.

Francine Kasongo said about her experience, “I was going to die in the house of the prophet (healer) with the illness, thinking that it came from a curse...” When I listened to the educators and made the decision to be screened, I discovered that “it was HIV/AIDS that infected me and not sorcery. I’m under treatment and I feel better. I was abandoned by my loved ones, but now I have been welcomed home.” (*New World Outlook*, Spring 2017, pp. 37-38.)

III

God’s power is at work in the healing process. These events are not some form of special magic or a promise that God will protect believers from illness. Hearing and listening are our way of continuing the healing experience in our lives. As we go from this time of worship today, the healing of the deaf man encourages us and the healing of the African woman lets us know that God’s healing love is available to all.

Bishop Albert Frederick (Fritz) Mutti, a Missouri native, is a retired Episcopal leader in The United Methodist Church. Fritz was elected to the episcopacy by the South Central Jurisdictional Conference in 1992 and assigned to the Kansas Area where he served until his retirement in 2004. He and his wife, Etta Mae, had three sons, two of whom died from AIDS. Fritz and Etta Mae have been leading forces in the movement to create an AIDS free world and served as Co-Coordinator of the UMC Global AIDS Fund Committee. Etta Mae and Fritz are the authors of a book, *Dancing in A Wheelchair*.