

Can you hear me?

We all want our words to be understood by others. And sometimes that understanding is more important than others.

In his book, *Stories for All Seasons*, Fr. Gerard Fuller tells of a chaplain at a state mental hospital who decided that what the patients needed **MOST** was to meet with ministers of their own individual faiths.

So he checked all their records and if there was a note about their faith preference, he arranged for that patient to meet with the appropriate minister.

Finally, there was just **ONE** patient left ... a Greek man who spoke **SO** crazily that the entire staff had given up on trying to understand him. Believed to be thoroughly schizophrenic, the man had been vegetating in the hospital for many years. No one knew much about him, where he came from, or how he came to be in the hospital, but **ALL** agreed that he was a **HOPELESS** case.

Nevertheless, the chaplain asked a local Greek Orthodox priest to pay him a visit, just to give the poor man a chance to speak in his native tongue as much as for any pastoral reason.

The priest returned from the visit and asked the chaplain, “What in the **WORLD** is that man doing here? He’s as sane as you and me!”

Bit by bit, the tragic story unfolded.

The man had jumped ship long ago in a nearby port. Speaking no English, he had gotten into some sort of trouble with the law and as mistakes sometimes happen, he got locked up in the mental institution.

There he **SLOWLY** learned English. But he learned it from **MENTAL** patients who taught him to speak totally incomprehensible English. To all the English speakers, he sounded schizophrenic and as far removed from reality as the rest of the patients on his ward.

The priest, however, conversed with him in Greek, the first time anyone had done that in the hospital, and the man spoke ... perfectly ... correct ... Greek!

The hospital staff was both shocked and humbled by the lesson which came from the Greek man’s unjust incarceration and treatment. The man spoke to them but the staff just didn’t **HEAR** what it was that he was saying.

We, too, sometimes **FAIL TO HEAR** what others are saying to us.

In my career as a naval officer and later as an executive in the corporate sector, I have run into this problem many times.

What one **THINKS** they **SAY** and what another **THINKS** they **HEAR** is often two **VERY** different things! Sometimes people already **KNOW** – or **THINK** they know – what another is going to say so they're busily formulating their response even before the other person finishes speaking.

It's **NOT** really communication. It's just talking. And when each leaves the conversation, they'll go away with a completely **ERRONEOUS** understanding of what was said. They just don't **HEAR** what the other is actually saying.

This is **NOT** usually malevolent but is caused by the **FILTERS**, **EMOTIONS**, or **PERCEPTIONS** of the two involved in the discussion or – all too often – the **ARGUMENT** – in which they are engaged.

Sometimes this is because the other person doesn't **LOOK** like the first, or perhaps they have a different ethnic or religious background, or accent, or it might just be something as simple – and common – as what is usually called “a personality conflict” ...

When this happens at work, it can mean loss of productivity, strained relationships, and even loss of employment.

At church, it can result in loss of fellowship and, sometimes, even loss of faith.

When it happens between nations, it can lead to war.

In today's second reading, St. James exhorts his fellow Christians to **AVOID** discriminating in favor of those who sport gold rings and fine clothes. He says that making a distinction – in faith – between the poor man and the rich one makes us judges of our fellow men, a role which God reserves for Himself.

And St. James reminds us that Christ **PREFERRED** the company of the poor and uneducated to that of the rich and powerful. James pointed out that Jesus chose those who are poor in **THIS** world to be the heirs to his kingdom in the next.

This, of course, is another way in which people may fail to understand each other. The shabbily dressed man may be **MUCH** richer in faith than the finely clad one, but the rich man may get more attention because of who he is in society, where he lives or what kind of car he drives.

We **HEAR** the one but **FAIL TO HEAR** the other.

Jesus gives us an even better example ...

As He traveled through the area known as the Province of Syria, people brought a deaf man to Him to be healed. Usually, Jesus would just proclaim the healing and the man would go away, but this time Jesus did something different.

He put his finger in the man's ears, spit and touched the man's tongue, saying "Ephphatha!" **[EFF- UH-THA]** ... that is "**BE OPENED!**" And the man could hear and speak plainly.

As most of you know, a man who is born deaf usually has a speech impediment, too – not because there is something wrong with his tongue or vocal cords – but because he – being deaf – doesn't **KNOW** how spoken words are **SUPPOSED** to sound.

Now ... most of you probably don't remember your **OWN** baptism, but this command of Jesus is actually spoken by the priest or deacon during the baptismal rite. The minister will make the sign of the cross over the ears and mouth of the one being baptized while saying, in Aramaic, Jesus's own language ... "Ephphatha!" **[EFF-UH-THA]** ... adding: "The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May He soon touch your ears to receive His Word, and your mouth to proclaim His Faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father."

Why do we do this? Because baptism gives us the power to **HEAR** what we could **NOT** perceive before. It's not a **PHYSICAL** power, but the ability to **HEAR** and **UNDERSTAND** the words of God to which we would naturally be deaf.

In many ways, this is actually a greater miracle than the cure of the physical affliction.

But it is also reflective of a tragedy that should **NOT** be happening in our world today.

As baptized Christians, we can **HEAR** the pain and suffering in the world, but we do not **SPEAK OUT** about it. Oh, some do, of course, but as a **GROUP** we do not! We, who have received this gift from God, do not use it to **HEAR** the anguish and to **DO** something about it.

Although James chastised the early Christians for discriminating between the rich and the poor, the fact is that we **STILL** sometimes discriminate. We discriminate because of race; between immigrants and the established social class; between our own interests and the aspirations of the impoverished.

Don't believe it?

If your neighbor was hungry, I'd bet that you would bring him some food. If his children starved to death, you would most likely feel shame and it would

definitely create a media frenzy. If just **TEN** people in Tennessee died of starvation, there would be a national outcry and senators and congressmen would call for an investigation and probably a new federal program to ensure that this never happened again.

But let **HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS** of people starve to death in Africa and what happens? Maybe it's **SOMEWHERE** in the middle of the newspaper under "Other News" ...

And because we do not show the same loving concern for all, for those who are close to us and those who are not, the born and the unborn, we do **NOT** bear the witness on earth that we **SHOULD** bear to the way of truth which Christ taught.

We do not **LEAD**.

That is probably the one greatest reason for the crisis the world is in right now.

The world is in **DARKNESS** because it is trying to **SEE** without the Light of Christ and **HEAR** without having its ears **OPENED** by the Holy Spirit.

We **HAVE** the power.

The Catholic Church is the **LARGEST** single religious group in North America.

SIX of **NINE** U.S. Supreme Court justices – including the **CHIEF JUSTICE** – are Catholic.

This is truly a **CHANCE** to make a **REAL** difference ... beyond doubt **CHANGE** for the better.

But will we as Catholics – as Christians – **USE** that power?

Will **WE** speak out against oppression and injustice?

Will **WE** speak out for the poor, the marginalized ... the **UNBORN**?

Or will we **NOT** be **HEARD** because our voices are silent? Or, perhaps, our voices will be schizophrenic ... a chaotic mix of sounds without meaning, impossible to understand?

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