

Jesus sighed before he said "Ephphatha"

scripture reading: Mark 7:31-37

preacher: Robert Steiner

"it is experience which shapes a language;
and it is language which controls an experience"
- James Baldwin

Toni Morrison, who passed away this week, did not only have a deep love of language. She was also always aware of the power language holds over people. The things we can do with words: to embrace or reject, to imprison or set free, to empower or manipulate, to heal or wound, to control or embolden.

In her speech, delivered in 1993 at her acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature, she uses a folktale of "an old woman, blind but wise" to reflect on the power of language. She is adamant that "oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge." And then, there is the kind of language that does not manipulate, does not seduce, does not wound, but rather "surges toward knowledge."

This is how the story goes:

Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise.

One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says, "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead."

She does not answer, and the question is repeated. "Is the bird I am holding living or dead?"

Still she doesn't answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands. She does not know their color, gender or homeland. She only knows their motive.

The old woman's silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter.

Finally she speaks and her voice is soft but stern. "I don't know," she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."

She interprets the folktale as a parable: Language is a bird, and the blind seer to whom it is presented gives us a choice: "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." Toni Morrison would go as far as argue that language is our only human power, and our responsibility. Her challenge to us: Go back to our own literary resources and make sure they are being used to heal and restore what is broken and wounded.

This responsibility holds a special truth, when dealing with what we consider sacred texts. And even more when trying to interpret texts about someone who has already been silenced, not so much by his

disability, but by the way he has been seen and portrayed by readers and interpreters over centuries.

In our story it is not a blind woman, but a deaf man, who presents me with a choice. I imagine the following conversation, or maybe I should rather call it interrogation?

Robert, I cannot hear or make out what you are saying about me, But what I do know is that the words come out of your mouth. Out of your mouth. And those words will nestle in the minds of your hearers. Once those words have found a home, they are powerful. They can scar or sanctify me. They can scar or sanctify your congregation.

Your problem, Robert, is that you think you know who I am, what I need, and who I should be. Even before you start to read you have made so many assumptions about me. Those words that you bring to my story have already silenced, if not killed me. Let me speak for myself. And I will be quite blunt and honest. I have bundled my thoughts in a few concise provocations.

You think you know what I need.

What you don't know is that every deaf person is unique. Yes, those who become hard of hearing later in life are often very keen to be cured and will try different avenues to restore their hearing as much as possible: hearings aids, cochlear implants, or other assistive listening devices. But then there are those of us who would never attend a so called healing service. Those who were born deaf or raised by deaf parents see themselves as part of Deaf Culture, a cultural, linguistic minority group. What both groups share is a desire for community, for life-giving relationships with family and friends. But the fulfillment of that longing can look very differently. For some it is about acceptance. For others it is about resistance.

What does the biblical text say? It says that I was brought to Jesus. It doesn't say who it was who brought me and it does not state if I wanted to be taken there. Interpreters simply assumed that I was there at my own request. But what if I was forced to be there? Or what if I went along because I wanted to end not my own suffering, but the suffering of my parents, who blamed themselves for my disability. Some of their friends thought that I am demon possessed. And our priests suggested that my parents had committed some terrible sin for which they are now punished.

You think you know how I want to communicate.

What you seem to forget is that there are different degrees of deafness, that there is a range between mild hearing loss and profound deafness. But there are also linguistic and cultural differences and preferences: Some use sign language, others speechread ("oralism") and speak English. One might be profoundly deaf, but culturally hearing, able to speechread and speak. But one might be culturally deaf, when being mildly hard of hearing, but born to deaf parents and therefore using sign language as the first language.

Sadly biblical texts themselves have both potential for wounding and healing. The text in Mark's Gospel was used against any form of sign language. When Jesus said the Aramaic "Ephphatha", be opened, then this was taken to mean that God wants deaf people to speak and speechread rather than sign. The edict of the Conference of Milan, Italy, in 1880 stipulated that sign language was no longer allowed to be taught. Frequently physical abuse was used to force deaf people to speak verbally. The biblical text became one of the foundational documents for what is referred to as the "oralism" movement. Lip- or speechreading (hearing through the eyes) and speaking were seen to be the only correct way of communication.

Given this history of stigma and shame attached to sign language, you will understand, Robert, why

verse 33 also carries ambivalent connotations for us. The text states: He took him aside in private, away from the crowd ..." For all too long "sign language" was banned to the back room. You could only sign in private. There was the constant fear of being labeled as animalistic or barbaric.

You think that because I am deaf, I am also dumb.

How silly! Yes, of course, historically deafness has been associated with an inability to speak well. And those who decided not to use their voices were then considered to be "deaf and dumb". But, the reality is, that there are very few deaf people who are also mute. Most of us can make sounds or speak. But we cannot hear the pronunciation of words, we often sound unintelligible. And sadly unintelligible sounds have been equated with a lack of intelligence. Just note how the word dumb changed its meaning from a lack of intelligence to an inability to speak. Are you surprised that someone of us prefer not to make any sounds at all?

Your biblical text says in verse 32: "They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech." So you might not be able to understand me, but I am clearly not mute. And impediment does not mean that I am stuttering. Stuttering rarely occurs in combination with deafness.

You think you know why I was healed.

As good Protestants you have been raised to believe that faith comes through hearing the Word of God. And no one less than the apostle Paul made that point in his letters to the Romans: "Faith comes by hearing" (Romans 10:17) But if hearing is required to have faith and to be saved, where does this leave those of us who are deaf? And if Jesus had to heal me in order to have faith and be saved, what hope is there for the deaf community? Please re-read the story. There is nothing in the text that suggests that I knew Jesus or had any faith in God. My healing did not involve me. Except maybe for this moment of surprise and shock, when he touched my tongue. I was considered impure, an untouchable. A righteous Jew would never do this. It was confusing, overwhelming to say the least. Why would anyone take such risks for me? It was more a moment of doubt than faith. It was a moment of disbelief!

You think you know how to interpret my deafness.

I know that some of you think of yourself as particularly clever interpreters. Robert, I have heard how much you enjoy symbolic or metaphorical readings of the biblical text. You have even argued that the writer of Mark's Gospel intends us to read the text metaphorically: It is not so much about the physical healing, but more about convicting the disciples of their spiritual deafness and blindness. This might very well be Mark's intention. But take a step back for a moment and understand what you are doing: Spiritual deafness and blindness are seen to be sinful and evil. To be deaf and blind becomes an image of failure and disobedience. And you keep using this kind of language when you speak of people who are blind to people's suffering and deaf to the cries of help. For us, who are deaf or blind, such metaphors are hurtful. We are made to feel not only inferior, but sinful, lacking insight and compassion.

Let's make this clear: When you fail to hear someone's request for help and miss the opportunity to show compassion, then you are not like me. You are not deaf and you are not blind. You can hear and you can choose!

You think you can be Jesus.

He used matter and a magical word to heal me. You could substitute the Aramaic "Ephphatha" ("be opened") with your favorite "Abracadabra". Not that I heard anything. He must have said it loud enough for the crowd outside to hear. But I could lipread it.

And then you would have to stick your fingers into my ears and touch my tongue with your spittle. And please don't think of it as an equivalent to today's sign language. These were rather invasive actions. And it didn't occur to interpreters like you if Jesus had asked for permission or not. The early Christians even followed Jesus' example at the occasion of a baptism: "The bishop or presiding officer conducting the baptism would spit on his fingers, then touch them to the candidate's ears, eyes, and mouth, symbolizing the person's new ability to hear the Gospel and witness to his or her faith." Again we are faced with a metaphorical reading of blindness and deafness and dumbness. To be blind, deaf and dumb is seen to be characteristic of non-believers. Where does this leave me? Do I have to be healed first, before I can call myself a genuine believer?

But there is a beautiful moment, when Jesus, for a brief second, would look up to heaven and sigh. I could see his facial expression and deep sympathy for my situation. He must have known how isolating it is to be different from the so called norm. I don't see or hear charismatic healers sigh on TV. They expect the one seeking the healing to do all the work of trust and faith. And if they are not healed, then the deaf are burdened with further guilt and shame. It is the sigh and sight of utter despair.

The sequence is correct: First my ears were opened. I could hear myself and the pronouncing of words became so much easier. I experienced what others only dreamed about, holding Isaiah's vision close to their hearts: "(Isaiah 35:5-6a)

Ironically, now that I was finally able to speak, I was told by Jesus to say nothing to anyone. Needless to say that I paid no attention to his request. This is the reason why I am here.

Dear friend, thank you for your frank and constructive challenge. It calls for repentance. The Greek word used for it in the Gospel is *metanoia*. It literally means to think again, to think anew, to think beyond one's present mind and view. It could even be translated as turning away from my own small thinking and enter into a much larger mind and view of the world. For us it would be to be suspicious where we function on the basis of "I think, therefore you are" to "You are, therefore I think." And I should certainly not ask God to open my ears and eyes, but maybe rather ask for God to open my heart and my arms and hands, ready to embrace a new language and a new way of being. James Baldwin poignantly argued that "it is experience which shapes a language; and it is language which controls an experience". There is much *metanoia* to be done. And such repentance is not a once off turning, but a continuously turning of texts, of egos, and of language.

It is about being aware that the bird is in my hand. In my hand.

Amen.

The interpretation of the biblical text is based on Kathy Black's reflections in *A Healing Homiletic* (1996).