

I really enjoyed my time as a seminarian. I have always enjoyed being a student and definitely enjoyed my time of study in preparation for being ordained. There are plenty of things I miss from that time in my life: the community life with the other guys, the times of prayer together, the deep discussions about the faith, and many other things--but there are definitely some things about the seminary that I don't miss. One of those is writing papers.

I wrote many, many papers throughout my time in seminary, but the granddaddy of all papers that I was assigned was the one related to my Masters of Theology. I was right at the end of my seminary studies and working to get a graduate degree. Part of that degree involved a lengthy paper related to a Master's thesis. So I had chosen to do a Master's Thesis related to the teachings of St. John Paul II and was feeling overwhelmed with the amount of work that I needed to do in order to get my paper done before the end of my time in seminary. With all of my other class work and the preparations for entering into life as a priest, I was feeling very unequal to the task of finishing this Master's paper.

Consequently, I was thinking of just giving up on that degree. I could have dropped that paper and still graduated and been ordained. But I was very conflicted. I had already put so much time and effort into it. How could I quit now? So with all this weighing on me, I did what I think many might do in that situation: I went out for a bite to eat. Food can be a great comforter, can't it? So with a defeated and heavy heart, I found myself in the Subway which was right across the street from the seminary.

As I was ordering my sandwich, the woman behind the counter must have recognized something was weighing on me and asked what was wrong. I proceeded to kind of unload on her, telling her about this big paper which I didn't think I could handle and how it was making me think about giving up on one of my college degrees. She took in all of this information, looked at me with a smile and told me, "Just give it to God, it will all be OK."

In that moment, it felt like a 100 pound weight was lifted off my shoulders. I hadn't been expecting God to speak to me in Subway that day, but he did. Through the humble instrument of that worker behind the counter, God gave me the hope to continue pressing on. I don't even remember her name or what I said back to her, but her words were exactly what God knew I needed. I'm pretty sure I went back to the seminary after finishing my sub and hit my knees, putting that paper and all of my school work in God's hands once again. And by God's grace, it was OK! I finished that paper and got the degree.

The Gospel passage we heard from this Sunday shows Jesus bringing healing and hope in a way which was probably unexpected. First, Mark tells us that the man doesn't come on his own. We hear that other people bring a deaf man with a speech impediment, asking that he lay his hands on him. Undoubtedly, these people had heard of Jesus' other healings and were seeking out a miracle for this man. We actually don't even know if they were close with the man or not. All we know is that they brought him to Jesus.

The fact that he was deaf and had a speech impediment would have made it hard for him to communicate with others. I imagine him being a bit hesitant as other people are pushing him towards what he may have seen as just some random preacher. Unless he was able to read and someone had written down some information about who Jesus was, he wouldn't have known much about him. But there he is with Jesus, who takes him away from the crowds.

This man who he never met before then did some very unexpectedly personal things with him. If you think about your ears, they are pretty off-limits as far as other people's fingers go. I don't know about you, but if I was deaf and only able to communicate in a limited way, I would be a bit put off if somebody came up and started sticking his fingers into my ears. But the man allows him. Then Jesus does something even more personal and unexpected: He touches his tongue. Again, this is something that I wouldn't let just anyone do. I feel weird even when doctors and dentists

touch my tongue. And while He is touching this guy's tongue, He spits. It must have been a strange and unexpected couple of minutes.

But through these very personal and unexpected touches, Jesus brings about a miracle. He says the Greek word, *ephphatha*, which means "be opened," and by this command allows the man to hear and to speak plainly! This unexpected encounter with the Lord brought him abundant healing.

If I had to guess, I don't think that this deaf man with a speech impediment was expecting anything extraordinary that day. But Jesus had other plans for him. He used the unexpected instruments of those other people and his own hands to bring him abundant healing.

Often we don't have very high expectations for God, do we? We go throughout our days and even come to Mass not expecting very much of God. But God knows what we need and often gives it to us in unexpected ways. I wasn't expecting that worker in Subway to help give me hope that things would work out, but she did. God used her in a marvelous and unexpected way that day. This man from the Gospel likely wasn't expecting to be healed, but Jesus did heal him.

Think about the unexpected way Jesus chooses to come to us in the Sacraments. He chose to use ordinary men like me to be instruments of his grace. Every day, at this and many other altars, Jesus comes to us through the unexpected appearances of bread and wine. He comes with abundant healing, mercy, and power, but too often our hearts are closed to Him. He invites us to have our sins cleansed away in Confession, but how often do we doubt that we need to confess to a priest? Nobody would have expected God to work through these humble and unexpected instruments, but He does.

When God comes in these unexpected ways, He invites us to respond as that man in the Gospel responded, by allowing Him to touch us. Too often we are closed off to the ways God wants to touch us. We close ourselves

off from other people and from Jesus in the Sacraments. We don't look for the ways God is coming to us each day. But when we allow ourselves to be touched in these surprising and unexpected ways, this is when incredible things happen, when we find healing, hope and new life for our hearts. I pray that we open ourselves to those unexpected encounters--both in the Sacraments and in our daily lives. God will continue to say, *ephphatha*, "be opened," to each of us, so that we can experience Him fulfilling what Isaiah prophesied in the first reading:

*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared;
then will the lame leap like a stag,
then the tongue of the mute will sing.*

Jesus wants to continue to perform miracles in our midst, if only we would have that openness to the unexpected ways He chooses to work. When our hearts and those of others do experience this unexpected grace, they will be filled to overflowing, as Isaiah prophesied: "Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe. The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water." Our dry and thirsty hearts will be satisfied and healed! Let's pray now for openness to Jesus' healing grace.

+ Heavenly Father, thank you for the grace which You shower on us through Jesus each day. Jesus, help us be open to Your healing grace as we meet You in our day. Holy Spirit, help us have the eyes to see Jesus when He comes to us in surprising ways. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen. +