

**September 5, 2021**  
**“Open Up”**  
**Mark 7:24-37**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

The word Jesus uses is “Ephphatha.” A transliteration of the Aramaic, the language of Jesus and the primary spoken language of most Jews in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. The word meaning, “be opened,” as Mark’s gospel tells us.

“Ephphatha,” in this case, directed at a deaf man with a speech impediment, brought to Jesus so that he might lay hands on him.

And that’s exactly what Jesus does. He takes him aside, in private, away from the crowd, and puts his fingers in the man’s ears. He spits on his own fingers and touches the man’s tongue. And then, with a look to heaven, he utters this word, “Ephphatha.” Be opened. And just like that, his ears are immediately opened and his tongue is released so that he is able to speak plainly.

Ephphatha. Be opened. Open up. This is the common thread, the common theme, running through this week’s lectionary readings. We heard it in the Psalm, singing praises for the God “who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.” Who “watches over the strangers” and “upholds the orphan and the widow.” Who “sets the prisoners free” and “opens the eyes of the blind.”

Same for the text from Isaiah, Chapter 35, which we didn’t read: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” This is a profoundly hopeful message of change and transformation.

Ephphatha. Be opened. Open up.

The healing in Mark is physical in nature. It’s intimate. It’s private. We already noted that Jesus was intentional about performing the healing away from the crowd, but then in what must have felt like a cruel and confounding instruction for the newly healed man, now ABLE to speak, Jesus orders him and those gathered not to.

Don't tell anyone what happened. We won't get into the WHY behind the order, only to note that it's pretty typical of Jesus. Naturally, the newly healed man – and they – can't help themselves. The news is too good NOT to share! And so, too, for the author of Mark's gospel. The message – and indeed the message of the gospels, the “good news” – goes way beyond any literal understanding of the healing itself. Be opened, OPEN UP, to the possibility of new life in YOUR life and in our SHARED life – even, and perhaps especially, where you don't think new life is possible.

Now remember, from our reading this morning, that the healing of the deaf man is actually our SECOND healing story. In Mark, it's coupled with, and preceded by, a very different story. A different spin on what it means to be opened, to open up. A boundary-crossing encounter, and frankly, one of the most intriguing in the gospels – especially when it comes to our understanding of Jesus.

This is Jesus' encounter with the woman identified in Mark's account as “Syrophenician,” whose daughter had an unclean spirit. Unlike the healing of the deaf man, this encounter is found in both Mark and Matthew. And as we'll see, the accounts are strikingly different. If we were in person I might have you get together in groups of two or three and do some comparative analysis. Explore how they're different and why each author might've included or excluded certain details.

But alas, we are not in person, so let me start by saying that in Matthew's account, the woman is identified as “Canaanite.” That may be more familiar to most of you than “Syrophenician,” but all you really need to understand here about either term is that she was a Gentile. She was not Jewish, unlike Jesus and his disciples. In fact, the region where Jesus is traveling is identified in Mark's account as Tyre (Matthew's account adds a second city, Sidon) – a region located northwest of Galilee, Jesus's home turf. A region despised by Jews, going back centuries when the people of Tyre were considered enemies of Israel, and were victims of God's wrath according to several accounts from Hebrew scripture. You may also recall that Canaan was the land the Israelites violently occupied and conquered after 40 years in the desert, identified by God as their “promised land.”

The point here is that Jesus is clearly venturing into foreign territory.

In Mark's account, Jesus is apparently trying to get some peace and quiet – entering a house where we're told he “did not want anyone to know he was . . .” Not so in Matthew's account.

In Mark, the woman somehow finds him, somehow finds her way into the house and begs Jesus to cast the demon out. And this is where we really start to see the difference from Matthew.

We're talking chapter 15, verses 21 and following in Matthew, if you happen to have a Bible with you and want to follow along. The woman starts shouting, SHOUTING, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” In Mark, her request is, if you will, a gentle knock at the door; in Matthew, she's banging as hard as she can!

And here we get to the intriguing turn in their exchange. In Mark, Jesus says to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” In Matthew, he actually ignores the woman at first, giving no response to her request. Then his disciples urge him to send her away because she keeps shouting, and Jesus then responds to her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” But she persists. She kneels down in front of him, an act of respect paid – remember – to a foreigner, a presumed enemy. And she says, “Lord, help me.” And then his response mirrors what we find in Mark's account, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

And yes, you are hearing it right. Dogs. This is Jesus talking. Jesus, compassionate Jesus, is insulting this foreign woman with an ethnic slur. Sure, the literal translation is more like “small dogs” – like little puppies or house pets – but it is a decidedly and disturbingly derogatory term all the same. This is JESUS talking!

If you're like me, you grew up with “perfect Jesus.” The Jesus who had to be perfect because the theology constructed around his being both fully human and fully divine apparently depended on it. The Jesus who, according to traditional Pauline theology,

was without sin but who became sin “so that we might become the righteousness of God.” The Jesus who never messed up, never fell short, never said or did the wrong thing, never had to apologize or admit he was wrong.

You might make the argument, or at least try to as many have done and continue to do, that Jesus must've had a good reason. He must've had some good reason to treat this hurting, vulnerable woman as badly as he does. To use the offensive language that he does. He couldn't have meant it that way.

To me, Jesus's behavior was explained away as an intentional test of the woman. Using language and reasoning that his contemporaries, his fellow Jews, would likely have used because that's how they would've felt – but behind it, secretly testing the woman's persistence and faith as a lesson to his current and would-be followers. Maybe?

But to read the story that way doesn't do justice to its full power. So I invite you to hear the story where Jesus is as fully human as he is fully divine. Where he is more painfully – and frankly, more relatably – human.

We continue, then, following Jesus's harsh words. Hear the profound power, first, of her response.

Test or not, she would not and could not have felt anything other than insulted by Jesus. Likely used to it, but insulted just the same. And most likely surrounded by men, by foreigners. Picture the scene, the intensity of the moment. This outsider, she who in this context is profoundly OTHER and has just been profoundly OTHERED by none other than Jesus, pushes back. She stands her ground and fights back!

She points Jesus's racial slur back at him, and turns his table metaphor on its head. In Mark she says, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” And in Matthew, similarly, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” We can't miss THIS power in the story, this woman's courageous persistence – on behalf of her daughter – to speak truth to the power in the room. To boldly insist that she is just as deserving of healing as anyone else.

In our present context, I can imagine her leading a protest in front of the Independence Blue Cross building in Center City, or on the steps of the Capitol building, megaphone in hand, demanding universal health care. Demanding equal and equitable access to affordable, quality care to treat her daughter's mental illness.

Debie Thomas writes that it's "As if to say, 'Lord, where's my Good News? Where's my place at the table? When will the goodness be good enough for me and for my daughter? If you are who you say you are, how can you be content while anyone goes hungry in the vicinity of your table? The good news is here somewhere, latent and waiting. I know it's here; you already have it. Now let it come to fruition. Look harder. Push further. See better. Believe that there's enough good news to go around. Expand the circle. Dissolve the boundaries. Widen the table. Preach your Good News to me.'" And we might add, "Be opened!" "Open up!"

Hear THAT power! And then hear the additional power of an all-too-human Jesus – product of his social context, informed and shaped as all of us are by conscious and unconscious bias and prejudice – having HIS mind and heart opened like the deaf man's ears and mouth.

In Mark's account, Jesus then says to the woman, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." And in Matthew, his response lifts her up as an example, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

This, friends, is Jesus allowing HIMSELF to "be opened" to the full impact of the good news. Barbara Brown Taylor describes the moment this way: "You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do."

How much more powerful to imagine One, to follow One, who – in his imperfect humanness, just like the rest of us – is able to acknowledge his own growing edges, his own blind spots. A teacher willing and able to be the student, to understand that learning is a mutual and ongoing process – requiring engagement across difference

and across boundaries of all kinds. Boundaries are learned, and so boundaries can be unlearned.

As Debie Thomas puts it, “The ‘Good News’ is not that we serve a shiny, inaccessible deity who floats five feet above the ground. It is that Jesus shows us – in real time, in the flesh – what it means to grow as a child of God. He embodies what it looks like to stretch into a deeper, truer, and fuller comprehension of God’s love.”

And she goes on, reflecting on what it means to move beyond any notion of a “perfect Jesus”: “Here’s the best part of letting Perfect Jesus go, and letting Real Jesus win our hearts instead: Real Jesus accepts the instruction of the woman who challenges him. He allows her – the ethnic, religious, and gendered Other – to school him in his own gospel. To deconstruct his bias and entitlement. To break the barrier of his prejudice. To teach him compassion. The Jesus who never loses a verbal contest with anyone else in Scripture sits back in amazement and concedes the argument to an audacious, female foreigner.”

Hear all of THAT power! The power of a woman demanding to be heard, demanding justice. And the power of a fully human Jesus finally, finally hearing her. Finally hearing HER, and responding in kind.

“Be opened,” she says to Jesus. “Be opened,” Jesus says to the deaf man – also a Gentile, a foreigner, by the way. The good news for all of us is that God’s welcome, God’s embrace, God’s beloved community, is wider than we who are fully human – as Jesus also was – are sometimes able or care to acknowledge. Much less live into.

So let US be opened. Open up YOUR eyes, your ears, your minds, your hearts, your lives to an ever-wider circle, a more inclusive table – whatever that might mean for you. Open up to learning and wisdom from unexpected places and people, across boundary and difference. Open up to the possibility of growth and change, of healing and new life, where you may not believe it’s possible. Because it is.

May it be so.