

“Ephphatha: Be Opened” The Rev. Keenan Kelsey Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA)
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TEXT: Mark 7:24-36 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syro-phoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said 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.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

ON THIS FALL GATHERING SUNDAY, when our children are gathered round and ready to begin a new year of learning; and so many adults have committed to a study of Bible and of spiritual gifts; and outside the church, teachers are lining up their array of yellow stars and red markers; and bathing suits, and sand buckets, and travel folders, are stored away, because now we are ready to begin learning again – On this Sunday, it seems fitting that we should read not only from Proverbs, wisdom lessons of life, but from the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus is learning too.

Now, undeniably, he was in a different place than we are today: not refreshed and renewed and ready for a new season of activity and purpose, but tired and worn out and looking for a good vacation spot to “vege out.”

Jesus needed some R & R, some time alone -- not some new learning experience. So we find him a good 100 miles away from home, in Tyre, a Phoenician port city in what is now Lebanon. He was hoping for anonymity, a chance to be a stranger in a strange land. He has told the disciples “Hold my calls. Take a message. I’m not available.” Like silk slipping silently to the ground, both weariness and worries were beginning to fall away.

But it seems that those most attuned to the presence of God’s grace in this world, those most needy, forgotten, downtrodden, sensed his presence. They must have carried the news, like one hungry beggar telling another where to find bread.

For soon, Jesus’ lesson, the learning he was not seeking, came knocking at his door.

I imagine the Syro-Phoenician woman having to push her way past Peter and Andrew who are acting like bouncers at a Hollywood hot spot. Standing in the doorway, arms folded across their chests, they step in front of her. They wouldn’t touch her of course; instead they looked at her like something they’d scrape off their shoes: a foreigner, unclean, and female to boot. “Go away, He’s not taking visitors.”

This woman had already taken a huge risk, herself approaching a foreigner, not a member of her family, and with no male relative there to protect her. But she doesn't care. Her little girl is sick and this man can heal her. She darts around the doorway guards and speaks out. "Please, sir. My daughter has a demon. Heal her."

Surely he will have mercy and do as she asks. But we have already heard his answer... "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Pardon? What? Did she hear him right? Yes, that was clear, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

I wonder what was going on in Jesus mind at that point. "I've got enough to do feeding God's chosen people without having to deal with different people too. Teaching, healing, feeding, clothing, casting out demons, it's never enough, and now you want me to help you, too?"

He uses a disparaging metaphor, a derogatory term popular at the time for describing all Gentiles. It means she has no business being in the company of a Jew. She's like an illegal immigrant asking a favor from George Bush, or a bag lady at the gated home of Bill Gates. He doesn't want to see her.

Now in his defense, up to this point in the story, Jesus is focused on the revival and renewal the Judaism of his day. He thinks this is what he is called to do, and his work at home is far from over. He is increasingly frustrated by the opposition of the Pharisees and the intransigence of the traditionalists, and the persistent fear and confusion of his own followers. Whether or not he eventually plans to reach out beyond the Hebrew people, now is not the time.

But this Gentile woman did not know all that. Undeterred, she nips at Jesus heels, answering with the only logic she could come up with: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Call me what you want, a mutt, a dog, whatever. Just heal my child.

In that moment, Jesus couldn't have avoided the dark pool of pleading in her eyes. Perhaps he saw the same hunger he was called to feed at home, the same sorrow he was sent to comfort, the same dream God sent him to empower, the same courage he was drawn to bless.

She was challenging him. "What are you going to do, master? Judge me by my externals or judge me by my heart?" I wonder if Jesus remembered his own recent retort with the Pharisees? In our Gospel lesson just last week we heard Jesus challenge an empty tradition by saying "It's not what goes in that makes a person unclean, it's what comes out. You are so blinded by tradition that you can't see what's possible." Now this woman confronts Jesus on the same point. She says, "What makes you think your message is only big enough for one group of people? You're the bread of the world -- God's mercy is limitless -- even the crumbs will be enough for me!"

He must have found her quick wit and persistence disarming; because in the next breath he said "Go on home; the demon has left your daughter." By the time she got home, the demon was gone. Her little girl was well.

Jesus, who is not only fully God, but also fully human, has a fully human learning moment; a learning moment that pits one grain of beach sand against the vast and roaring fury of the ocean. A learning moment that reminds us today that God's power is made perfect in weakness.

And here Jesus is, weak as a dog, uttering the most ungodly words, learning the depth and breadth and height of God's love from someone who is different.

In the midst of his grief and frustration about the covenant community and on retreat from the struggle with the structures, Jesus meets a woman who has a wisdom saying to challenge his own wisdom, that suddenly opens up a whole new world of possibilities for him. "Ephphatha." In a split second, the equilibrium of Jesus is thrown off and he is opened to new insight.

Jesus moved on, the scriptures tell us, toward the Decapolis. That was a federation of ten cities in Palestine, east and south of the Sea of Galilee. It was another 10 miles out of his way, where another group of Gentiles brought him the man who could neither hear nor speak. No quick comebacks from this guy -- simply friends who begged Jesus, begged him, to lay hands and heal him.

So Jesus heals yet another foreigner. Using two symbols, fingers for deafness and spittle for speech, he looks up into the heavens, and sighs, "ephphatha, be opened." And just as his own ears and lips had been opened in Tyre, the deaf mute's ears were suddenly open to hear. His lips were suddenly open to speak.

The Gospel didn't record what the man had to say, or what he heard in those first moments. But we do know that nobody else could quit talking about what had happened.

We all can be blessed with the sudden joy of being opened:

We bend over with a child to watch a caterpillar in the marigolds, and our eyes are opened to a new way of seeing the world. A friend tells of how caring for her father, stricken with Alzheimer's, has enriched her life beyond her fatigue and frustration and our hearts are opened to the recognition that sometimes joy comes even with suffering. A man is interviewed on the radio about his culture, his country, and his faith, and we find that our minds are opened, and we are unable to judge or criticize them as we once might have. We watch a program about world hunger, and when we catch a glimpse of how little some people have, our eyes are opened to the fact that our world is, comparatively, filled with blessings and good things.

The day that the Gospel of Jesus Christ went to the dogs, it came to us as well. Jesus looks at us and says "Yes, you are right." Even the crumbs of a gracious God are powerful and generous enough to drive away your demons.

Look what happens when hope won't quit. It was once unthinkable that slaves should be freed. It was once unthinkable that marching into someone else's country and taking it over, might be morally wrong. It was once unthinkable that a country could or should survive without capital punishment. It was once unthinkable that women could be ministers. Perhaps soon it will be unthinkable, that men and women who happen to be gay, can't be ordained to serve God, or that churches will fight and slander over external differences.

But until, like Jesus, we dare to begin to think the unthinkable, we shall never know. Thank goodness for women and men who seek justice and will not accept "no" for an answer -- even when the "no" seems to come from God.

"EPHPHATHA" To be honest, it is a command...not a suggestion.

"Ephphatha! Be opened." Let your eyes be open to see the opportunities God is making available in your world.

- "Ephphatha! Be opened." Let your mind be open to new ways of thinking that will expand your understanding of God's will for you and yours.
- "Ephphatha! Be opened." Let your mouth be opened to share with your friends what God is doing in your life.
- "Ephphatha! Be opened." Let your life be open to the movement of the Spirit, open to release from whatever is scaring you, stopping you, holding you back, from becoming the person you want to be, the person God wants you to be.

Be opened! Jesus said, not only to the healing power of God, but be opened, as Jesus was, to the possibility that what we once knew to be true may now be an insufficient truth
Be opened to the possibility of growth and change
Be opened, to hear that, indeed, God is still speaking!

O God, help us to see that you are bigger than our barriers, that you are taller than our fences, and that you're deeper than our denominations. AMEN