

Pentecost 16 B 2024

Mark 7: 24-37

September 8, 2024

We have not just 1 but 2 amazing stories in our Gospel reading today. But I have to confess that I did not always feel that way. For many years this story of the Syrophenician woman begging Jesus to heal her daughter and Jesus calling her a dog was at the top of my list of stories I wished weren't in the Bible. I hated this story of Jesus being mean—even cruel.

But over time, I was opened up and came to see the story so differently—so much so, that it is now one of my favorites.

For some reason, I never paid as much attention to the second story—the healing of the man who is deaf and has a speech impediment. But today I am, and I'd like to look at how these stories work together to give a vital message for us.

In the first story, it's clear Jesus is having a moment. He slips into a house, and he didn't want anyone to know that he was there. But, you can't hide much in a small town and this woman—who is as marginalized as you could be—as both a woman and a non-Jew—she just kind of boldly bursts through those status barriers because she is desperate for her daughter to be healed.

And, instead of responding compassionately, Jesus tells her to get back in her place—which is under the table. He calls her a dog which is as demeaning as any slur a woman could hear.

Thank God—literally, thank God—the story doesn't end there. God works through this desperate mother to open Jesus up. She responds to Jesus' putting her in her place with some real sass. "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

I know there's something for me, too.

That's a bold statement of God's expansive love and care. And it's like her words are this intense "aha" moment for Jesus. He's changed—transformed--by this encounter. His mission is bigger. It's not just to the Jewish people. It's to the Gentile people, as well. There's not a hierarchy of value when it comes to human beings. There aren't some people who are told to go to the back of the line for healing because they aren't in the preferred group.

This is a challenging picture of who Jesus is. In the creed, we say that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. That's an incredibly complex idea and I'm almost certain I'll never fully understand it. I'm sure everyone comes at this differently, but I never had much trouble believing Jesus was fully God—fully divine.

But I've realized that I spent a lot of years thinking of Jesus as basically God in disguise in a human body. But, increasingly, the

humanness of Jesus has come more into focus for me. And there's nothing like this text, if you want to see the human Jesus. He's tired. He's tired of helping people. He just wants a break. He's not feeling expansive. He's feeling limited. He reaches a breaking point.

But instead of breaking him—through this woman—God *breaks him open*. Being human is an experience of continual growth and change. Jesus was not born fully formed and I don't think he came to adulthood fully formed either. In this story, we see a fully *human* Jesus, changing and growing.

The second story is also a healing story, but it couldn't be more different. That is an important message in and of itself—healing looks different for different people. In this story, a deaf man is brought to Jesus by some people—we assume they are family or friends who care about him. Jesus takes this man aside—away from the group who had brought him. And then he does some things that seem very strange—he sticks his fingers into the man's ear and spits and touches the man's tongue.

I had this part of the story opened up for me by a colleague who had gotten an incredible insight into this story by reflecting on with a deaf community. What Jesus is doing here is speaking in a kind of sign language to the deaf man. He's saying, "I'm going to

unstop your ears and free your tongue. Are you on board with this?”

Jesus got the go-ahead and then he says, “Ephphata”. That’s Aramaic for “Be opened.” It’s one of the few Aramaic words in the Gospels. A friend calls them, “linguistic fossils”. They tell us something important about the early church. The fact that it isn’t translated means they said this word *a lot*. *Ephphata. Be opened.*

It's like the way we say, “Alleluia”. Praise God.

They said *ephphata* in liturgies, in songs, in prayers.

Be opened.

That is the vital message for us. Right here and now.

And it’s what connects these two stories. In the first story, Jesus shows us what it looks like to be opened up by God through another person and both their need and their trust. He *doesn’t* resist the opening from what could be seen as a correction by the Syrophoenician woman. He *doesn’t* double down defensively. He *doesn’t* feel ashamed.

Jesus moves forward--immediately. What I notice is that, in this encounter, Jesus treats the man who is deaf as a full human. According to rabbinic sources, deaf people were seen as being like minor children or people who are mentally ill—in the sense that they

were not responsible for keeping the Jewish law. But Jesus takes him aside and communicates with him, recognizing him as someone who is a full person who can participate in this healing or say no to it. He's giving expression to the expansive, inclusive kind of love God has.

And the story that follows this one is Jesus feeding the 4,000. It's similar to the feeding of the 5,000 but the difference is this feeding takes place in *Gentile*—non-Jewish—territory. Jesus has compassion on these Gentiles, and they are fed and there are 7 baskets of crumbs left over. This is a marked change from a desperate mother claiming her right to crumbs under the table.

It's cascading. This opening up of Jesus leads to healing and life for others. Jesus shows us—in his full humanness—the amazing possibilities that come from allowing ourselves to be opened up.

This week we experienced the tragedy of one more school shooting. As you probably know, 2 students and 2 teachers were killed—and 9 other people were injured at Apalachee High School in Georgia. The kid who did all this was only 14 years old.

As awful as this is, it seems like a lot of things went right in terms of how teachers, students and school security responded. Their actions likely saved a lot of lives.

Now, we hear the familiar response of politicians about how we need to harden the schools—how there need to be more metal detectors and police in schools and how teachers need to be armed.

But experts have been saying that what we really need in schools is softening rather than hardening. We need more support services in schools—people who can “identify and support students who are in crisis before they hurt others.”

Colt Gray was a kid in crisis. His family life was badly broken. He’d been identified by the FBI as someone who had talked about doing a school shooting the year before. According to his aunt, he’d been begging the adults around him for help. His father said he’d been bullied—something that is common for most school attackers. *And* he had easy access to an assault rifle.

What would it have been like if Colt had gotten the support he needed?

We know what kids need most is to feel respected, connected and that they belong. Public health violence prevention experts say that helping kids develop skills around conflict resolution, stress management and empathy is where we need to focus. As a country, in order to heal this epidemic of gun violence, we need to *be opened* to this way of responding.

As you may know, a couple of weeks ago, we finished a 3-week Peace Camp that we did as a part of the Ward 4 Faith Leaders Against Gun Violence. Several people in the congregation were very active as volunteers and Vicar Rachel and I were there most of the time. As I'm reflecting on it now, it was something that truly was a picture of that kind of support experts tell us is needed.

Through us, God created a healing space where kids felt respected and connected—and where they felt like they belonged. I could see it and feel it and it was confirmed by the fact that they *all* want to come back next year. And we focused on those skills of empathy, conflict resolution and stress management. We also had activities that focused on the future—like goal setting and financial literacy. There were art, music and creative movement activities; time to play outside, field trips and outdoor exploration.

They did group projects—and it was notable that each group decided to focus on bullying. They had an opportunity to present their projects to our Council member, who gave them a lot of encouragement. And we still had time for a lot of food and fun!

I've been thinking about the Peace Camp and our Forward Together Plan, in light of these healing stories, and the healing word of Jesus, "*Be opened!*"

When Jesus did his healing work, it wasn't with the goal of getting people to join his church. He did it out of compassion for their suffering. He did it to reveal what God is like and what God wants for people and all of creation. It's like the first objective of our Forward Together plan: to galvanize the congregation around an outreach ministry that promotes God's peace and justice.

Just as Jesus did, a healing ministry like the Peace Camp proclaims the Gospel. Even though there was no specific religious content, the campers and their parents knew that we were church people. For me, it was fantastic to have our building used in this way. Mostly we stayed in the Undercroft but some of the kids wanted to see the sanctuary. Vicar Rachel took them on a tour, and they were blown away with how beautiful both the sanctuary and the chapel are. Several of them wanted to go back the next day and the next.

Both the healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter and the man who was deaf were small ministries in terms of numbers. But these small ministries had spillover effects. Jesus himself was changed in his encounter with the Syrophenician woman and her bold and sassy response—which was, at its core, a powerful statement of God's expansive healing love.

His healing of another Gentile person—the man who was deaf and had trouble speaking clearly—led to his friends telling everyone about it. Jesus had told them not to talk to anyone else about it, but they couldn't keep this to themselves. It was too wonderful—too life-changing. They had trouble *not* speaking clearly.

Right after that, the healing spills over in a massive way when Jesus feeds the 4000 Gentile people. They all know that there is something holy happening—and they are part of it.

It will be hard to know all of the ways that Peace Camp or the outreach ministry we decide to do together spills over. I believe many of the kids are thinking of themselves as peacemakers in their schools and communities in a way that they didn't before. I believe they will carry with them this experience of being respected and feeling connected. I hope that, in moments of doubt, they can remember this time and feel good about who they are. I hope they can take with them this experience of being treated kindly and know that this is how friends treat each other. And I hope that when they are given an opportunity to help resolve a conflict in a positive way or to speak up when someone is being bullied, that they will.

So, I believe this healing word of Jesus, *Be opened*, is so important as we head into acting on our Forward Together plan.

***Be opened* to trusting that God will lead us—will speak to us.**

***Be opened* to hearing where God is leading us.**

***Be opened* to giving your time and energy to it.**

***Be opened* to God giving you the strength and energy and commitment that you might not have right now.**

***Be opened* to being a part of the bold, expansive, healing love of God in a way that you never have before.**

Thanks be to God for this healing word. Amen.