

"Be Opened"

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24 From there Jesus 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, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 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." 28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." 30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

31 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. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

(Mark 7:24-37)

The last time I was in my hometown of Tallahassee, I took some time to walk the halls of my home church. There is something comforting to see things just the way they always were, familiar sights, familiar sounds, even familiar smells. I wandered up to the youth wing of my church. There was the room that I helped to repaint in the 9th grade—where I got to stretch my wings with mural painting. There was the room with the uncomfortable wooden chairs where I sat through Confirmation class. And then there was the main hangout space that still had the mismatched furniture, with everyone's favorite 1970's leopard print couch. I am not kidding when I say that our rite of passage as seniors in high school was getting to sit on the couch during youth group.

Of course, there are things I know that have changed. People have come and gone, new groups have come through to that space and put their mark on the place, the rituals and traditions have even changed and stretched in new ways to welcome new youth. And that is what I love about a church home, there are things that look and feel the same, the places that give you those warm, fuzzy memories, but there are also the places that you can look to see a new thing happening, a new spark, or new way of being. In the church world, you could call that the Holy Spirit. But whatever you call it, it is that something new that comes with the familiar that has a way of teaching us.

Perhaps this morning you might be wondering about this scripture and just what it could possibly have to mean for us on Rally Day. This is a story we don't hear as children, it does not make the list of the stories that we study at Vacation Bible School, and maybe for many of you, this is the first time you have heard this story. It is not a very familiar story, and even more so, it is not a very familiar picture of Jesus. This is not Jesus the preacher, or Jesus



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the teacher, or even Jesus who sits and welcomes the children. That Jesus is the one we could imagine as the one in gentle, serene posters. You know the ones, the ones that show Jesus with the blonde flowing hair and the cool sandals. The ones with Jesus walking calmly amongst sheep. The ones that are often put in children's bibles or found in church youth rooms with mix-matched furniture. And I'll be honest, yesterday, when a group was here helping to prepare our classrooms for everyone today, we may or may not have found a few of these paintings. The truth is, as these posters illustrate, that a lot of the time we like to envision Jesus in a certain way as teacher, preacher, healer and there certainly are occasions for those descriptions. But, in today's reading of the Syrophenician Woman, we get an unconventional and uncomfortable picture of Jesus compared to the majority of the Gospel.

This Jesus goes beyond sassy Jesus. This Jesus, in the interaction with the woman who begs healing for her daughter, is downright rude. The woman, who is driven by a mother's instinct to do everything she can for her daughter, goes to Jesus, finding him hiding away in a house. She goes to Jesus and falls at Jesus' feet begging for his help. The writer of the story makes the point to note that she is a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She is an outsider. But not just an outsider, she has everything going against her in that time- she was a woman, she was a Gentile and to add that she was a Syrophenician was basically to say that she was from the wrong side of the tracks. And to approach Jesus went against all of the social customs of the time. But she is so desperate, she is unafraid to break protocol. We expect upon reading her request from Jesus, that Jesus would be compassionate and say something of her great faith and offer healing. But instead Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus not only takes time to point out that she is not deserving of his healing, because she is an outsider, but even goes so far as to insult her, calling her a dog, which in the Hebrew Bible, that title was reserved for the lowest of Israel's enemies. Not exactly the model for pastoral care.

Often when we read this story of the Syrophenician woman, we try to rationalize Jesus' behavior. We say it is just his humanity acting up and he is snippy because he was tired and looking for rest. Maybe he was hangry, or you know just annoyed because he was trying to get a break from people. Others have written that Jesus' divinity justifies his actions, that somehow by demeaning this woman and her daughter he is teaching her a lesson about faith and belief. That makes sense, if not for the fact most of the time Jesus heals without any faith requirement. People come to Jesus and he heals them, some who just happen to be in the right place at the right time. Even the incarnate God is allowed a pass after so many healings and teaching times. Perhaps it is as simple as the theologian Sharon Ringe explains saying, "The Syrophenician Woman caught Jesus with his compassion down." But I don't know if I am so comfortable with letting Jesus off the hook, and obviously neither was the Syrophenician woman. She challenges back, saying, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And in that challenge, Jesus sees its time for the healing. And maybe there is more healing going on than just with the daughter. Jesus has a sort of conversion moment, where he realizes that he has lost sight of what he is called to do, what he has been sent to do, what he is telling others to do.

In this moment, he remembers that his mission of healing and salvation was always meant to go beyond the chosen people, and reach even to the outsiders, especially to those on the margins, even to those who seem unworthy enough for crumbs. That is the vision for the Kingdom of God.

And for today, the story does not end there. On this Sunday this encounter is paired with another healing story, this one looking a little more familiar to us. Jesus, on his way back from Tyre, encounters a deaf and mute man who seeks healing from Jesus. Brought before him by an unnamed group, Jesus takes the man aside, away from the crowd, putting his fingers in his ears, spitting, and touching his tongue. In one of the most intriguing healing stories, he looks up to heaven and says 'Ephphatha' which means, "Be Opened." And immediately the man is able to hear, and to speak and is healed. Be opened. This word of opening isn't anything new for readers of scripture. The prophet Isaiah describes a time when, "the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped." The Psalmist sings praises to God who executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, and opens the eyes of the blind.

But it seems, in today's reading, it is Jesus himself who has his eyes opened and his ears unstopped. Teachable and changeable moments come in the most unexpected encounters. Hearing that phrase right next to the story of the Syrophenician Woman I wonder if it is not connected to his previous encounter. Be open to hearing new things that God is doing, and being open to tell others that good news. Which is exactly what the mute and deaf man does once healed. Jesus tells the man not to say a word about it, but after not speaking for so long it says the man "zealously proclaimed it" despite what Jesus told him to do. He simply could not help it, and the word multiplies in that story as well, people proclaiming what God has done. That God is indiscriminately healing and blessing.

When Jesus is challenged by the Syrophenician woman, an inconvenient prophetic outsider, she forces Jesus to reexamine his entire ministry. Because for all of his boundary breaking, for all his breaking bread and meal sharing with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners, in this moment, he is called to see how his table must be made a little wider. She demands a place at the table, and in doing so she helps Jesus make room for other outsiders. When Jesus heals in these stories, he is not just physically healing, but he is healing a community. Because he sees that his ministry is opened to the outsiders, even beyond the physical healing, he is restoring them to a social status where they not only belong, but they are welcomed.

How are we being called to be opened on this Rally Day? Who is God putting before us who has something unexpected to teach us. How are we being called to join in the ever-expanding vision of God's Kingdom and to welcome the outsider, the broken, the unloved. Or, how are we willing to be transformed, to have our eyes opened and our ears unstopped? This summer, we experienced a great season of change, which is not always easy for a church. You worshipped in a new place. You were physically re-oriented to see one another in worship in new way. I heard from many of you that you felt the Spirit moving in new way there, you felt an energy and sense of community that you haven't felt before. I felt that same Spirit this summer when we joined with the preschool to expand our welcome for Vacation Bible School, where we learned that in all times, where times of great peace or great change, God is with us. I felt that Spirit when I traveled with our high school youth to Montreat where we learned how to boldly use our voice and humbly listen to other's voice when it comes to issues of justice, peace, and inclusive welcome. I feel that Spirit when people come to share their dreams and visions of new ways of teaching and learning for the families of this church and for this community. As we settle back into this place that feels comfortable, let us remember what shook us up over the summer worshipping in Davis Hall. Let us remember

that this same Spirit is here with us in this place. Let us remember the unexpected moments of teaching we experienced when we found ourselves pushed beyond our familiar pews.

Let us be opened to the truth that God is still working within us, molding us and transforming us. "Being open" is also great phrase for how we in the church encounter modern Syrophoenician Women in whatever form she takes. To be open to her lessons is to be opened to the inclusiveness of the kingdom of God that ever expanding. To hear her and listen to her words reminds us that if we miss all this boundary breaking, we miss the Gospel's essence. It is this story today that reminds us that we are called to be opened as a church and challenged in our mission to the community around us. To likewise hear the voice of the Spirit speaking to us on all days, but especially this Rally Day where we get excited about jumping into "a program year." Part of the joy and celebration of this day is that we are drawn back together, back to a place that often feels like home, where we are welcomed and invited to learn about God and hopefully that will include unexpected lessons from unexpected places and people that remind us of God's limitless grace. We can be open to consider how we will try as a church to hear perspectives and stories that help shape us into a better likeness of Jesus. Let us be opened to the teachable wisdom of people who look nothing like us. Let us be opened to the widening of the table, expanding our welcome far and wide. Let us be opened to the voice of God that speaks to us from unfamiliar places. And let us be opened to the Gospel that opens our arms wider to love one another, love this community, and all that lies beyond these familiar walls. Thanks be to God for the courage for and the gift of such a calling. Amen.