



“Be Opened”

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday and Sunday, September 8–9, 2018

All Services
The Reverend John H. Brock
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Mark 7:24–37

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

The first of our two gospel stories has always rather bothered me, in the way that Jesus comes across. Admittedly, we don't know what he's thinking. We don't have any insight as to what Jesus is feeling when he speaks. We don't get *Jesus was tired*, or *he said in a kind voice*, or *speaking sarcastically*, *Jesus said*. Things like that would be SO helpful, especially when we look at this encounter with a Gentile woman.

Some quick historical background: our lesson calls her “a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin.” (Ελληνις, Συροφοινικισσα (Mk. 7:26 NA28)) That means she was *culturally* Greek, and *ethnically* Phoenician, who lived in Syria (modern Lebanon), rather than from North Africa, where there was a strong Phoenician presence as well. In addition, the people of Israel did *not* get along all that well with their Phoenician neighbors (regardless of direction). Phoenicia was a wealthier country, with a higher standard of living. *And*, they had a long-standing tradition of raiding farms along the Israeli border. The fact that the Phoenicians were pagans, worshiping their own gods, not the God of Israel, is simply the proverbial icing on the cake.

This encounter takes place near Tyre, which is a Phoenician coastal town, maybe forty-plus kilometers northwest of where Jesus was in the previous chapter. But somehow, word of who Jesus is, or at least, what he is *capable* of, has gotten to the coast. Specifically, to the ears of this mother whose daughter was ill. She approaches Jesus, asking him to cure her little girl.

There are **so many** things going on in this encounter, let me give you just the top two. First, she's a *woman*, approaching and speaking to a *man* to whom she is not related (that almost *immediately* ranks her, in the eyes of anyone observing this exchange, a “working woman”); **And**, she is a *Gentile*, that is, Greek, approaching a person of Jewish faith. Neither of those are grounds for a conversation to go well.

We also need to remember that Jesus has been working hard. In the chapter before our reading: John the Baptizer is beheaded; Jesus feeds the 5,000, & then walks across the Sea of Galilee to get some alone time. When he thinks he's getting that alone time, he almost immediately has to deal with a bunch of Pharisees who get nit-picky about obeying the dietary laws. The guy is tired. He's probably *grumpy* (I know I would be),

and he's purposefully headed to an area where he thinks he won't be pestered. But of course, he's spotted. He's found out. And we get this exchange that has always kind of bothered me.

Let me share something with you: A couple of weeks ago, I met with Stephanie Maurer, our Communications Director. She's a wonderful woman, good at her job. I walked into her office, late in the afternoon. I remember it was a Tuesday, because we have staff meetings on Tuesday mornings, so we were both already tired and grumpy. I can't even tell you why we had to talk, but I know it was for something important at the time. While we were discussing whatever it was that was so important, she remembered something else she wanted to show/tell me and paused to find it on her phone.

Now, I have *tried* to tell you all for some time that I am *not* a **nice** person. I am snarky, and sarcastic, and I am **way** too cynical. And sometimes, I'm sure this doesn't happen to anyone here, but sometimes my mouth reacts before I really think things through. So, when Stephanie said, "Let me show you something" because I am more of a *jerk* than I am a decent person, I simply responded "Wait, let me put on my interested face."

And I tell you all that, because *I think*, in part, that is kind of how Jesus felt. That's how this story makes sense to me. All Jesus wanted was some peace and quiet. And this woman, who wasn't even one of his own people, comes up and starts to pester him about her daughter. Was Jesus snarky in his response? Was he sarcastic when he said "*Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*"

I've heard all sorts of explanations over the years: that Jesus was testing her faith; or that he responded theologically. But lately, I got to tell you, I'm thinking the guy just kind of snapped.

From her point of view, this woman has opened herself up, she has made herself vulnerable, she is *pleading* for her daughter's **life**. She comes to this Jewish guy, and literally **begs** him to heal her little girl, and Jesus gives her a snark response. This woman is amazing, because, apparently, without even skipping a beat, she fires right back:

"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

He calls her a **dog**, and she *still* responds on behalf of her daughter. Was Jesus so . . . Embarrassed? Ashamed? Cajoled? that he heals the little girl without touching her, without, as far as our text says, even seeing her? We don't know.

We contrast **that** encounter with the one which immediately follows. Again, to put things in context, Jesus & company traveled at least a day from the region of Tyre, southwest back toward the Sea of Galilee. There, a deaf, nearly mute, **man**, whom we assume this **man** is Jewish, is **brought** to him. So already, there's a whole bunch of differences:

Woman : Man
comes on her own : is brought to him
Gentile : Jewish

This man is cut off, closed off, to those around him, with difficulty in communicating and being understood. In further contrast, Jesus *physically touches* this fellow, placing his hands on the man's ears and tongue, and *speaks* words to heal him. There's no witty repartee' this time, no ethnic or gender slurs. He simply says - and it's so important that Mark records it twice - First, *Ephphatha*, εφφαθα, (Mk. 7:34 NA28), an Aramaic word; and Second, in Greek, *dianoichthati*, διανοιχθητι (Mk. 7:34 NA28), both of which means, literally, *to open*, as in allowing something to come out, or gaining insight, to understand.

What a contrast. Going by my interpretation, in the *first* encounter, with the Gentile woman, Jesus needs to be prodded, encouraged, even, to do the right thing the moral thing. In that *second* encounter, with a (presumably) Jewish male, Jesus jumps right in, and simply heals the fellow.

What is it in your own life, how do **you** need to be opened up to God? Because you do. We **all** do. In *each* of us, there are parts that we shut off - to others, to God, to ourselves. Sometimes, that's good. When we're trying to keep from listening to those voices, those impulses, that are striving to make us do the things we **know** are *not* positive, the things that we know hurt others, that push us to say things like "Let me put on my interested face" or worse.

But too often, we *allow* ourselves to be *open* to those negative parts, and we shut ourselves off to the *positive* parts, the ones that urge us to go talk to that co-worker who is looking really stressed out, or helping that stranger Giant get something off the top shelf they just can't quite reach it.

God calls us to be open. Christ calls to us to *Open* ourselves to not only *hear* God's voice calling to us, but to *act on* what God wants us to do.

Ethnic heritage, economic background, spiritual strength, none of those are important in sharing God's message of love and grace and forgiveness and strength. What **does** matter, is how we respond, when God opens our hearts, and calls us to service.

Amen.

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