

15 Pentecost
Mark 7:24-37

Following his scathing exchange with the Pharisees and scribes about the purity laws, about what was clean and what was unclean, and about what defiles a person, Jesus went away. He went away to the region of Tyre, where he entered a house, and hoped that no one would know he was there. But it wasn't to be. The passage tells us that Jesus couldn't escape notice. You'll remember this part of the story, I think. There was a woman who came to Jesus whose little girl was sick, possessed by an unclean spirit, the story says. This woman bowed down before Jesus and begged him to heal her little girl. The woman was a Gentile and it would have been shocking and presumptuous for her to approach Jesus. It would have been even more shocking to the bystanders for Jesus to respond, and that may help to explain the exchange that took place. The woman begged Jesus to help her daughter, and Jesus said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

To us that sounds like a harsh and very un-Christlike response, but the woman was not going to be turned away. She said to Jesus, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." In the next sentence Jesus as much as commended the woman and announced that the little girl had been healed.

That brings us to the part of this passage where I want to focus. We hear that "Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis." Now, if you try to plot that journey on a map you'll see that it just doesn't work. It's like talking about leaving La Jolla and going to Del Mar by way of Chula Vista. It doesn't work.

But in any case, the writer seems to be saying that Jesus was heading toward home, but that he was still away from his familiar territory, and possibly still looking for some respite. As he traveled we read that "They brought to Jesus 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 spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said, 'Ephphatha', that is, be opened. And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly."

This story would have been told orally for a long, long time before it was finally written down. This was an oral society. Almost all communication was achieved through the spoken word. That means that the man in this story spent all of his time on the fringes looking in, never knowing exactly what was going on. He didn't hear the chaos of the marketplace. He didn't hear whispered words of love, or shouted words of warning. He couldn't hear the rabbi when he prayed, "Shema Yis-rael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad, Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord our God is one." He couldn't hear anything, and that meant that his was a marginalized, compromised, disenfranchised life.

And Jesus took the deaf man aside to a quiet place, and he touched him, and he sighed.

What do you think that sigh was about? I believe it was a sigh of identification, of compassion, I believe it was a prayer. Jesus could not keep himself aloof and he felt the deaf man's suffering. So he touched him, and he sighed with identification and compassion, and then he said, "Ephphatha, be opened."

Jesus didn't want the deaf man to have to live on the margins any longer. He touched him and he healed him so he could be filled and enlarged and enlivened by an abundance of life. "Be opened," Jesus said.

I can't think of a more appropriate challenge and invitation for those of us at St. James as we prepare for the beginning of a new program year, and anticipate the calling and arrival of a new rector. Be opened.

There are two ways of approaching life. There is a way that is detached, dissatisfied, discouraged, intolerant, apathetic, and there is a way that is engaged, involved, hopeful, excited, appreciative. Some people are in one posture or the other all the time, but most of us travel forth and back depending on the changes and chances of any given day.

But we're not castabouts with no role to play in the unfolding of our lives. We have choices, and the choices we make have eternal implications. Jesus has extended to us an invitation to abundant life. That invitation comes to each of us as individuals, and it comes to all of us as a parish community. For every single one of us, and for all of us, the decision to accept or refuse this invitation involves a willful, conscious and consistent act. If we decide to say yes, if we say we want this abundant life, then it is imperative that we hear the words of Jesus as he brings healing to the deaf man today. Be opened.

The process of being opened is the way to abundant life, but it involves hard work and some road hazards along the way, because if we are opened it means that we really do hear. We don't hear only the voices of praise and compliment and like mind, we also hear the voices of those who disagree. And if we are opened it means that our arms aren't wrapped around ourselves, or even just around our familiar family and friends. Our arms will be opened wide to embrace the ones we or the world may have thought were un-embraceable. If we're opened then the resentment and mistrust that infect our hearts will be dissolved and we will be able to say, "I'm sorry." or "I was wrong," or "You go first." If we're opened then we will want to listen and to learn and we will be able to acknowledge that the issues we face are often very complex. We will understand that there are different ways of seeing things, and we'll realize that the willingness to change an opinion might just be an important sign of personal growth. Being opened can be hard work.

It can be hard work, because open is, well, open is open. That means open to blessings, open to blessings in disguise — and open to struggles and disagreement and pain.

But there is no other way if we want an abundant, God-filled life. Jesus spoke a word of invitation to the deaf man, and the man could hear and speak. Jesus speaks the same word of invitation to us this very day.

Be opened.
 Stop living in the past.
 Confront new issues.
 Visit the sick.
 Be a better listener.
 Put aside the back-biting and nay saying.
 Encourage the hopeless.
 Meet a stranger and make a friend.
 Learn a new and healthier way of operating.
 End a feud.
 Talk to each other face-to-face.
 Put all the cards on the table.
 Learn to disagree without being mean-spirited.
 Tell the truth, hear the truth.
 Ephphatha.
 Be opened.

Let this be our watchword and our goal and our way of living. Let this be our way of claiming and keeping and sharing the abundant life of God.

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