

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Mark 7:24-37; James 2: 1-17  
September 9, 2018

### *Ephphatha*

Mark wrote his Gospel in Greek. Greek was the best choice if he wanted the good news about Jesus Christ to get around, because Greek was the common language of the Roman Empire. (I know, you'd think it would be Latin, but it was Greek.) Not the Greek of Homer and Plato – koine Greek, common Greek – the form of Greek spoken in the market place and in the shops and streets.

There are five instances in Mark's Gospel, however, where Aramaic, the language Jesus himself spoke – pops out in Mark's text.

Today's Gospel reading is one of those occasions. The Aramaic word is *Ephphatha*, and it means "Be opened." That little word might just be the key to both of the stories we just heard. It might even be a lens through which to view the entire gospel of Jesus Christ and the mission of his Church.

So, if you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember this: *Ephphatha* – Be opened! It might make all the difference in how you hear and live the Good News.

Last week's reading from Mark caught Jesus just as he was about to leave Jewish territory and move over into Syria, which is predominately Gentile. In today's reading, we find him in a private house in the city of Tyre, doing his best to remain incognito. "[He] **did not want anyone to know he was there,**" Mark writes. I picture Jesus in a house on St. George Island, wearing Foster Grants and a T-shirt.

Even without the aid of Twitter or Facebook, however, the word gets out, and the residents of Tyre begin showing up at Jesus' door. One of them is a woman whose sheer audacity must have shocked Jesus and every other man in the house. She doesn't knock. She doesn't arrange for an introduction through a male relative. She doesn't even introduce herself. She just bursts into the house and throws herself at Jesus' feet.

Her daughter, according to Mark, has an “unclean spirit.” Who knows what that might mean in modern terms? Clearly, she is desperate that her daughter be made whole again.

Remember Sarah Palin, the “mama grizzly?” Well, compared to this Syrophoenician woman, Ms. Palin was shy and retiring. This Gentile woman has just crossed over several boundaries – of race, of sex, of religion – to lay her plea for mercy and grace at the feet of this foreign rabbi named Jesus.

Jesus replies, **“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”**

Without missing a beat, the woman replies, **“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”**

It’s hard to know what to make of this exchange. Jesus doesn’t exactly call this Gentile woman a dog, just as Congressman DeSantis didn’t exactly call Andrew Gillum a monkey, but he comes very close, doesn’t he?

Maybe Jesus is having a bad day. After all, he is supposed to be on vacation, and this woman is calling him back to work. Shall we allow Jesus this embarrassing expression of his own humanity, this temporary lapse into what looks to us like sexism and racism? Should we let him off the hook just this once? Give him a Mulligan?

Maybe Jesus is learning something about the very nature of the kingdom of God which he himself embodies. Maybe, since he has taken off his rabbi’s hat and is off duty in Tyre, this woman has assumed the role of rabbi and is opening up Jesus’ own understanding of the Good News.

That’s one possibility; here’s another. Perhaps there is a twinkle in Jesus’ eye when he spouts that tired old racist drivel about non-Jews being dogs and only Jews being God’s children. Maybe he is lobbing that age-old prejudice like a slow-pitch softball floating over home plate, precisely so this clever, gifted, fierce young mother can take her bat and knock it out of the park.

\ Maybe this bold, witty Gentile woman is saying to Jesus, *Ephphatha*, Be opened! Be opened to a Gospel that includes, rather than excludes, that crosses boundaries, that breaks down diving walls of hostility. Maybe Mark doesn't mind portraying Jesus as a jerk just this once – for the sake opening all of us up to a God whose love is broader and deeper and more encompassing than any of us imagined.

Not only that. Maybe this woman is opening us to a different way of thinking about faith.

Maybe faith isn't all about *certainty* – the opposite of doubt. Maybe genuine faith, like this Syrophenician woman, is bold, daring, insistent. Faith like that “puts first things first (a daughter's health, for instance) and it marshals every resource available from wit to wisdom, insight to impertinence. It seeks God out with vim and vigor, and is finally unafraid to wrestle, to strive, to struggle with God. In short, faith is living and active. As James puts it (in today's Epistle reading) **“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”**<sup>1</sup>

Reading between the lines, I'd say Jesus is wowed by this woman's living, active faith. Unlike Jesus' own male disciples, who are constantly missing the point, this woman is close to the kingdom, and perhaps, with her quick reply and rapier wit, she even draws Jesus a little bit closer as well.

Whatever the case, she goes home and finds her daughter lying on the bed, the demon gone, her health restored.

In the next scene, we find Jesus in another Gentile region, this one a bit closer to the Sea of Galilee. A man who is deaf and has a speech impediment is brought to him. He takes the man aside, away from the crowd. He performs a ritual action. He puts his fingers into the man's ears, and he says – what does he say? *Ephphatha!*

You remembered! Good for you!

Be opened. The man is healed, his tongue is loosed, and even though Jesus warns everyone to keep quiet about what has taken place, they blab the good news everywhere. **“ . . . the more he ordered them (to keep quiet) the more they proclaimed it.”**

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<sup>1</sup> These words come from an online commentary found at [www.saltproject.org](http://www.saltproject.org)

Perhaps you have noticed a current of Christianity that flows in a direction different from these two stories. It takes faith in Jesus in a different direction. It doesn't travel outside of Galilee into foreign territory. It doesn't welcome the outsider who barges in without knocking. It doesn't shout *Ephphatha* when it encounters challenges to the old way of thinking and the old way of being the church. It is closed to reform and intent on entrenchment.

Instead, this way of being Christian draws boundaries and fortifies walls. It seeks to make Christianity great again by making all other forms of religion small. It channels faith into creedal tributaries that never overflow their banks. It exploits our fears of "the other" and closes its ears to the prophetic voice of the outsider.

This stream of Christianity often calls itself "evangelical." That word "evangelical" comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means "good news." Just lately, it has become harder and harder to discern what's good in that approach to the Good News. It is as though weeds have grown up in the garden, choking out the joy, the grace, and the love that God has for the whole world.

I welcome the label "evangelical." I wish it had not been appropriated and downsized to convey something it was never meant to convey. I would love to see that word "evangelical" rehabilitated and restored to its fuller meaning.

To all of us who seek to follow Jesus Christ, whatever label we wear, this text from Mark cries *Ephphatha!* Be opened!

A Gospel closed to the work of the Holy Spirit is no gospel at all. A Gospel open to the Spirit brings freedom to those in bondage, sight to the blind, speech to the tongue-tied, and hearing to those who have lost an ear for grace.

*Ephphatha, beloved. Ephphatha.*