

Sunday, September 5, 2021
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 18 (Year B)

Mark 7.24-37

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/572289277555238>

(Sermon begins at about 20:20)

“The Spirit of Ephphatha”

In our Gospel reading for today, we find ourselves at a crossroad. Or rather, we find Jesus at a crossroads. At a decision point that will change the trajectory of his mission and ministry. And one that challenges us as we consider our own mission and ministry. This crossroads is not just a theological or a metaphorical one, but is also a physical one. Physical in the sense that Jesus has left his home territory, Jewish territory, and has entered the province of Phoenicia—the Gentile territory to the north of Galilee. Venturing into a different cultural and religious milieu than his own.

Today’s reading contains two stories that illustrate this crossroads. One in practice and the other in metaphor. Before I tackle the more challenging first story, which deals with matters of practice, I will touch on the second story, which provides a metaphorical image for what this crossroads is all about. One that can be summed up in one word: “Ephphatha.” Or two words in English: “be opened.”

This second recorded encounter between Jesus and a resident of this Gentile territory is really straight-forward. Some people bring Jesus a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment. Jesus takes him aside and heals him with the laying on of hands and the utterance of a simple word: “Ephphatha,” that is, “be opened.” End of story. But this simple act, or rather, the utterance of this simple word, “Ephphatha,” while summarizing the physical act of healing performed on the deaf man, also has a metaphorical significance. Succinctly summing up what Jesus’ foray into Gentile territory is all about. Providing a metaphor for why he has ventured from the (relative) safety of Galilee.

Now, to the first recorded encounter between Jesus and a resident of this Gentile territory, where we see this concept of Ephphatha, of being opened, demonstrated in even broader terms. As we heard, Jesus is in a home in the region of Tyre. Presumably that of a friend or acquaintance. In that area, there is a Syrophoenician woman, a Gentile, who has a daughter who is possessed with a demon. She has somehow heard of this Jesus and the healings he has performed. Perhaps he can help her daughter. She essentially barges in unannounced and begs Jesus to help. We are familiar with the well-known, albeit uncomfortable and even tense, exchange between the two. In response to her request for help, Jesus responds “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Mk 7.27). Meaning, what he has to offer, his ministry of teaching and healing, are for the children of God, for the Jews. Not for Gentiles. This strikes us as being a bit rude and un-Jesus-like. But then again, Jesus is the product of his time, his culture, and his religion. All of which focused on maintaining Jewish ritual purity. The woman, not easily deterred, responds “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s

crumbs” (Mk 7.28). Basically saying, “surely God’s grace is not so limited that it cannot be extended to others. Even to us Gentiles.” Jesus is so impressed with the woman’s tenacity, with her quick-witted response, with her moxie, he relents and heals the woman’s daughter.

Now, the interpretation you commonly hear—and the one I have generally preached—is that Jesus is so impressed with the woman’s persuasiveness that he changes his mind. He gives in to her demands and heals the child. Not only that, as a result of the exchange, Jesus reevaluates his whole mission and ministry, which until now has been focused solely on ministering to Jews. Here he has an epiphany. He realizes that the woman is right and that he needs to expand his understanding of what his mission and ministry are. He needs to expand who he ministers to. That God’s love and mercy are vast enough for everybody, not just the Jews. As commentators generally note, this is the only argument in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus loses. But then again, in losing the argument, everything changed. His ministry was opened up to more than just the Jews. His ministry was opened up to include all humanity. Ephphatha! Thanks to Jesus’ perspective being opened, being expanded, his ministry to the wider world is also opened and expanded. Double Ephphatha.

But wait. There’s more. While preparing for this sermon, I ran across another interpretation I had never heard before. That Jesus went to Gentile territory specifically to expand his mission and ministry. After all, why would he venture outside the safety of Jewish territory into Gentile territory? Territory that was not only foreign, but also hostile. The argument goes that he already knew what he wanted and needed to do. But that he knew he would meet with some blowback, with some criticism, from his Jewish followers. That his disciples and followers, being devout Jews, would not readily understand why the change in his focus. So, Jesus needed something to illustrate the need for, the grace and mercy involved in, expanding his work to include Gentiles. The Syrophenician woman barging into the house where he was visiting provided just such an opportunity. At least, potentially. That in seeing the woman’s determination by barging in, Jesus saw that she just might be the one to help him make his point to his followers. Not that he pre-arranged the encounter. Just that if there was a situation that might work to his advantage, this would be it. So, when the woman begs for Jesus to help her daughter, he initially denies her request in hopes that she will be determined enough to play along. To fight back. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” [wink, wink]. Expressing the prevailing cultural and religious prejudices that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles in a folksy way. One that would invite a rebuttal from someone so determined.

The woman takes the bait. As one commentator notes, she “adroitly turns the metaphor on its head: even the dogs gather the table’s crumbs; the logic of abundance implies that God’s grace is for all people, right here and right now. Jesus immediately concedes the point . . . thus establishing the woman as an exemplar of faith, a model theologian, an outsider who understands better than the insiders do.” Thanks to the woman playing into Jesus little play—or rather, the “teaching moment” he has so deftly devised, “the Gospel is now officially on the loose, and the Syrophenician woman is a pivotal hero in the story, the tenacious mother who helps Jesus open up the circle of salvation to the wider world.”¹ Ephphatha! In this interpretation, it is not Jesus’ perspective that is opened and expanded, but that of his

followers. With the end result being the same. That Jesus' ministry to the wider world is opened and expanded.

We will never know for sure which of these interpretations of the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is more accurate. I suppose, it ultimately does not matter whether the Syrophenician woman changed Jesus' mind or whether Jesus, with the help of the Syrophenician woman, changed the minds of his followers. The end result was the same. Ultimately, Jesus' ministry was expanded beyond the way it had always been. That it was opened up to new possibilities. To new opportunities to share the good news of God's love.

Regardless of the interpretation, we are, of course, beneficiaries of the exchange between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman. It is thanks to the expansion of Jesus' ministry to include Gentiles that we are even here, that we are even a part of the Body of Christ. And we are recipients of the message conveyed through today's Gospel encounters: Ephphatha, that is, be opened. Whether it was Jesus who was opened or the disciples, it was ultimately the extent of Jesus ministry, the breadth and depth of that ministry, that was opened. As the Body of Christ, we are called to carry on with his ministry. We are called on to continue our ministry in the spirit of Ephphatha. In the spirit of being opened.

Because of the encounters in today's Gospel, because of the spirit of Ephphatha that resulted, Jesus went on to expand and adapt his ministry to new and different conditions. He changed who he ministered to, where he did his ministry, and how he did his ministry. As Christ's Body in the world, as those who minister in his name, we are called to do so with the same spirit of Ephphatha. And that has been happening, in very real ways. A year and a half ago, who would have thought that we would be ministering to people who live in places like New York or Florida or Texas? Ephphatha, be opened. A year and a half ago, who would have thought that we would be conducting worship services online? Ephphatha, be opened. In spite of the economic fallout from the pandemic, who would have thought that people would have stepped up and provided financial support that not only helped us keep the door open (figuratively speaking), but to expand some of our outreach ministries? Ephphatha, be opened.

The pandemic has been difficult in so many ways. But if there is anything good that has come out of this crazy time, it is that we have been provided with opportunities to live more fully into the spirit of Ephphatha. Into a spirit of being opened to how we need to change and expand our ministries to meet the ever-changing needs of the world around us. It has provided us with the opportunity to seriously consider who we are called to be as the Body of Christ; to consider how we are to live into who God is calling us to be; to re-consider where, how, and to whom we are called to proclaim the Good News of God's love.

We would not even be here today if it were not for Jesus and his followers being opened to new ways of engaging in God's work. We would not be in as good a shape as we are as a parish if we had not been opened to trying new things to meet the challenges of the pandemic. Just imagine what we can accomplish, what we can become, moving forward, if we continue to heed the words of our Lord: Ephphatha, be opened. Not just reacting, but by intentionally embracing the spirit of Ephphatha.

¹ “Be Opened: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Fifteenth Week after Pentecost,” SALT, August 30, 2021.
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/9/4/be-opened-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-sixteenth-week-after-pentecost>.