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Be Opened

Mark 7:24-37

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

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. They brought to him 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 he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

“Be opened,” Jesus said, and immediately the man could hear. “Be opened,” said Jesus, and the man’s life changed forever.

A man named Tom had been deaf for years, since the age of fifteen, when he suddenly went deaf. When his inability to hear affected his ability to talk, he gave up trying, ashamed because insensitive people made fun of his stammering.

After a doctor performed surgery on his ears, Tom regained his hearing. Tom said, “At first, I talked and talked – I needed to release what was bottled up inside me. I would [talk and talk to everyone. . . . But] I was not listening and I was hurting people by inflicting myself on them. I started trying to listen; to do this I had to stop talking and open not only my ears but also my heart. Then I discovered that most hearing people are deaf. I learned too that most people [have] speech impediments – we can never communicate exactly what we mean to say. The greatest tragedy,” said Tom, “is not to be deaf and dumb, but . . . to have these faculties and never really use them to listen below the surface of things.”ⁱ

Most hearing people are deaf. Most of us have speech impediments.

Jesus came to do more than heal the deaf and mute. His words to the man, “be opened” are about more than physical healing. “Be opened” is really about a way of life, a way of being alert to God’s presence, even where we might least expect it, being open to God’s call, even when we don’t necessarily want it.

Jesus knew something about this. The first healing we hear about today is about such a call. Jesus encounters a Gentile woman whose daughter needs healing. Here between the two of them stands the ancient barrier between “us” and “them.” Jesus responds to her with words that mean, “I was sent to the Jews. It’s the Jews who have been longing for the messiah, awaiting the one who would come with the power of God to heal and transform. I came for them. A Jewish Messiah was sent to the Jews. Case closed.” Only he’s not nearly so polite about it. Jesus’ words are harsh. There’s a boundary here, he says, a closed door. What can I do?

But this woman is no respecter of boundaries. Closed door? Open it. “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” she says. She takes words about a way that is closed and opens them. She transforms them into a profound statement about the universal mission of Jesus Christ. “Yes, Lord, feed the children by all means. But remember, even the dogs, even the Gentiles, eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”

And then Jesus says yes. “For saying this, go, your daughter is healed.” Maybe he remembered the words of Isaiah, “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord . . . to love the name of the Lord . . . these will I bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house . . . for

my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Maybe he was now ready to claim his calling that to be the Messiah of the children of Israel was to reach out to the whole world.

“Be opened,” Jesus said in order to heal, knowing that there were now no barriers, no boundaries, no shut doors that Jesus would not push open to bring God’s love in.

Be opened.

What happened when people were healed by Jesus? Some went away marveling and wondering, carrying their pallets, leaving their beggars’ cloaks behind, walking and leaping and praising God. Some ran to tell others. Some simply went away and we don’t know what happened next. Significantly, we are told, some followed on the way. That is, they followed Jesus, became disciples, people who learn from Jesus, live like Jesus, love like Jesus, give like Jesus, pray like Jesus, trust like Jesus, or try to. Some were opened and followed on the way.

That’s the invitation to us, to be opened, to follow Jesus on the way, to approach life’s journey as pilgrims, not tourists. Pilgrims are people aware that life is a sacred gift from God, an opportunity to seek and serve Christ in all people, to listen and hear beneath the surface of things, be part of a community, risk being transformed as we make our journey, in fact, expect to be transformed – seek transformation out through worship and learning, to be opened to the God who loves us and all those God gives us to love. Pilgrims are opened on the journey.

The alternative is to be a tourist on the journey. To admire what others make possible. To take in what those who have gone before have given. To visit, but not really be changed. To observe, but not really participate. To be content with knowing a few phrases, but never take the time to learn the language. As spiritual tourists we hear the sound of God’s truth, but never really let God’s Word penetrate our hearts. We can go around and around the mountain, admiring the view from all sides, but never take the pilgrim’s journey to the mountaintop.

Being a tourist is fine for vacation – wonderful in fact. But it’s no way of life. God did not come to the earth as a tourist. God took on flesh, was born, and lived and died as one of us. Jesus did not just observe, he

participated. He did not give people healing and wholeness just so they could carry on, preserve their way of life. He didn't float above humanity – he got right in here with us and gave us a pattern of life that includes growing and learning, being opened, and being changed.

As Christians, our way of life begins at the baptismal font. For hundreds of years, and beginning very early on in the church, the word Jesus spoke to the deaf man, “Ephphatha! Be opened!” was used in baptism. As part of the baptismal rite, the bishop put spittle on his fingers and then touched the baptismal candidate on the ears, the eyes, and the mouth and said, “Be opened!” The gesture meant that in receiving baptism the person is opened to God's love, opened to experience it with all their senses, opened to hear and see and breathe and taste and tell the mystery and the awesome love of God around them as they live their lives in the world.

We have given up such unhygienic practices in our baptismal liturgy. But we have not given up the belief that baptism opens us to experience the love of God in all areas of our lives and in baptism, we are set on the way of pilgrimage – full participation, engagement, and transformation as we make our journey in this world.

Be opened. Even now Jesus sighs for us, longs to give us hearing that listens beneath the surface of things, speech that speaks clearly with truth and compassion, strength to open any closed doors.

Amen.

ⁱ In *Sundays into Silence – a Pathway to Life*, by Gerry Pierce. Claretian Publications, 1998.