

“EPHATHA! – BE OPENED!”

9 September 2018

Mark 7: 24-37
16 Pentecost B

Welcome to worship this morning. Today’s sermon was written by Bishop Bob Humphrey and comes to us with his permission, and also his greetings on behalf of our siblings in Christ throughout the Virginia Synod and ELCA.

I am always humbled and amazed at the ways God works in our lives. Because, it’s no secret... in some ways these have been hard times for us. As we think about our lives and those with whom we live and love and work – we think of disagreement, disease, divorce and death. Dear long-serving saints have either moved away or joined the church triumphant; we may face financial challenges here or at home. And many have stories to tell about hardship, fear and frustration.

And yet here we are... God has gathered us in a sacred community, listened to our confession, forgiven our sins and sent us so many blessings, right? Can you name the blessings in your life? I think of beautiful babies born; the laughter and hope of our children; new members and great ideas for ministry and mission. I think of marriages, baptisms and signs of growth, hope and transformation in the lives of our members, this congregation, our synod and ELCA!

Last week we contemplated the passage just before this one from the Gospel according to St. Mark, the 7th chapter where Jesus confronted the Jewish religious leaders with their sinful pride and devotion to human tradition, reminding them that nothing from the outside can defile, *it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come...* (Mk.7:21a NRSV).

Today we continue with that reading and find Jesus and his disciples in Gentile territory where a woman from outside the Jewish faith, and often rejected, begs Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. He replies, in accordance with Jewish tradition, with a hard rebuff, and yet, is answered with remarkable tenacity and faith – prompting his full embrace, acceptance, grace and power.

One commentator quipped, “The previous incident shows Jesus wiping out the distinction between clean and unclean foods...here we have him wiping out the difference between clean and unclean people.” (William Barclay, The Gospel of Mark, ©1975, p.177.)

In a time when we all too often see people divided and defined by their race, religion or origin, Jesus reminds us there are no unclean people – only children of God – only people for who Christ died on the Cross. If we are honest, we must confess that we have our own prejudices and preconceived notions about others that keep us from trusting and loving them as God desires.

Thus the connection is made with the second reading from James in which we are challenged to examine the connection between our profession of faith here in worship and our daily attitudes and actions. *God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.*

James goes further to say, *if you show partiality, you commit sin...* (James 2:5, 9) This week we are challenged to get out and serve the poor in the ELCA’s annual “God’s Work, Our Hands” week of service. This is a very tangible way to honor the poor and love our neighbor. But even more crucial is for us to adopt our Lord’s command that we *love others as he has loved us* (John 13:34)

All of this is the prelude to the miracle of hearing and speech given to yet another Gentile brought to Jesus. In this case, a man. This is the second of three stories in Mark in which someone is brought to Jesus by others to be cured (2:1-12 and 8:22-26).

The symbolism of this should not be overlooked... We tend to think faith is something we do or choose. But, notice... these people in need of Jesus' power do not come to him on their own and he does not make them whole because they deserve it or earned it in any way. They literally do nothing. This man can neither hear nor speak plainly. He is not Jewish and knows nothing about Jesus – and yet Jesus opens his ears and gives him the ability to speak plainly.

Notice also how the miracles of Jesus parallel the story of creation in Genesis. God speaks and something is created and God declares *It is good*. Jesus speaks and people are transformed into a new creation and those who witness it say *He has done everything well...* (vs.37a). In Jesus there is quite literally *a new creation!* (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Life *can* be really hard at times... And often, in the face of life's challenges, we too are deaf and speechless before God. And yet, God goes out of the way to come to us. Over and over again God reaches out to us. No one is outside of God's love or reach. No one!

Receive this Holy Word of God. Come to this Holy table where the “bread and wine touch *our* lips and suddenly *we* are opened to the forgiveness and love of God.” (Richard Carl Hoefler, There are Demons in The Sea, ©1978, p.191).

Right here, right now... we are brought to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the company of others... where he continues to teach, and touch, transform and save us.

So, come one and all..., receive the love and forgiveness of God and the bread of life!...

Ephphatha! – Be Opened!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Robert F. Humphrey + Bishop, Virginia Synod, ELCA

- *Ephphatha is pronounced, F-uh-thuh*