

September Sermon/Worship Series:
“Jesus as Teacher: Lessons for a New World”

“Crumbs?”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 9, 2018
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Holy Scriptures: Mark 7: 24-37 James 2: 1-10

Mark 7:24-37 (NRSV)

²⁴From there he 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, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He 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.” ²⁸But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” ²⁹Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

James 2:1-10 (NRSV)

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

Ephphatha!

This is the Greek form of an Aramaic word, meaning “Be opened.”

Ephphatha was spoken by Jesus Christ

when healing a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment (Mark 7:34).

One of the unique characteristics of the Gospel of Mark

is that the author uses the very Aramaic words which Jesus spoke.

He spoke Aramaic.

He ministered to the Hebrews.

The Gospel was spread to the Gentiles,

and Jesus’ words interpreted into Greek,

and in time into most every known language and dialect.

These stories and lessons and teachings of God’s love

were shared and spread so far and wide

that we are here today,

grateful and empowered to be opened

–*Ephphatha!*--by the grace of God.

Consider that Christianity would be profoundly different today,

including the life of a deaf man with a speech impediment in Sidon...

if Christ hadn’t had a life-changing, earth-shattering, ministry-altering

encounter with a Greek woman in Tyre.

And if she had not connected with God in such a profound way,

who knows the shape we’d be in.

I am reminded of the story of the family who invited some people to dinner at their home.

Right before they broke bread, the mom turned to her 6-year-old daughter and asked her to offer the blessing.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said.

“Just say what you hear Mommy say,” said her mother.

Everyone bowed their heads and the child prayed, saying,

“Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?”

Ever want to get away?

That was a tag line for an airline offering low-cost airfare for quick getaways.

Jesus of Nazareth sought to get away.
The 7th Chapter of Mark opens with a confrontation.
Some Pharisees and their Scribes had come out from Jerusalem.
They were looking for Jesus,
 whom they found teaching and healing people in the countryside.
The religious leaders of the day didn't seek out Jesus of Nazareth
 because they wanted God's blessing or sought healing or craved learning.
Their intent was to trip up, one up, and get a leg up
 on Jesus the Teacher in front of His disciples and the crowd.
*What is it about the human psyche that we choose to believe
 that when we put someone else down we are lifting ourselves up?
 How long till we figure out a rising tide lifts all boats?*
The Pharisees challenged Him on whether His followers
 strictly adhered to and followed the Law of Moses.
He responded that while the Law of Moses is sacred and to be respected,
 what matters most is what is in your heart,
 because what comes out of your mouth
 is of greater impact than what goes in.

Boom.

Figuratively speaking, Jesus turned the tables.
He won the argument and won over the crowd.
He did not, however, win the hearts and minds of the Pharisees.
We know this because they returned to Jerusalem to plot their revenge.
Jesus and the disciples decided it might be a good time to lay low for a while.
Time to get away.

Exit Stage Left.

Jesus left the known and went into the unknown,
 a land foreign to him, the land of Tyre and Sidon.
Mark informs us that Jesus went from Tyre to Sidon
 to the Sea of Galilee in the midst of Decapolis.
Never mind, my friends, that Sidon is north of Tyre
 and forget for a moment
 that the Sea of Galilee isn't in the midst of Decapolis.
Whatever may have been Mark's knowledge of geography or sources,
 Jesus made a wide-ranging journey into Gentile territory.
He left the familiar behind,
 going away from the land of his ancestors and childhood
 where Hebrews and kinfolks reside,
 to go where He was not known,
 into a land whose Gentile population
 Jesus had previously never expressed any interest in
 transforming.

He simply wanted to get away, to get away from it all.
Grab some R & R, read a novel, kick back for a few days.

Mark says that they arrived in Tyre, He entered a home, *"but He couldn't hide."*

Other Bible translations read:

"He could not be hid..."

"He could not keep His presence secret..."

"He didn't want anyone to know He was there, yet He couldn't escape notice..."

His reputation preceded Him.

Folks outside of Jerusalem and Judah had heard

about this Jesus, this Rabbi, this Teacher of the Law and Love.

Imagine that.

Word on the street reached a Greek woman

that Jesus was just down the road, there in Tyre!

She was culturally a Greek; by race a Phoenician from Syria.

She asked for mercy for her daughter.

Jesus heard this song before. He knew the music and the meter.

God had sent Him to a fragmented world

to provide God's promise of mercy,

mercy for the broke and broken, the marginalized and wounded,

the lost and last and the least.

One day Jesus gave a blind man his sight after he cried out,

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

One day a woman in desperate need of help

was healed when she touched the hem of his cloak.

One day he told of a prodigal son who was in want in a far-off land,

who would have eaten crumbs, but no one gave him anything;

yet it was God who welcomed him home and killed the fatted calf.

People asking only for crumbs of mercy

were richly rewarded with the extravagance

of God's power and promise and providential love.

Jesus took suffering to heart.

Except here.

Except in the land that Jesus had gone to get away, to be free, for some R & R.

No longer was He in the land of the Hebrews, the Chosen People of God.

So, He responded to her like this:

"Let the children first be fed,

since it isn't good to take bread out of children's mouths

and throw it to the dogs!"

"Sir," she said, "even the dogs under the table get to eat scraps dropped by children!"

"For that retort, be on your way," He said.

"The demon has come out of your daughter."

She returned home and found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

(Mark 7:25-30)

My Lord and my God.

She had looked for help, hope, and healing...not for herself but her daughter.

She was determined not to accept anything less;

not crumbs nor rudeness;

not a closed door, a closed mind, or the closed hand

of the One she trusted to transform and restore her child.

The bridge to her daughter's wholeness seemed to be blocked...

At first, Jesus spoke rudely to her

out of some deep-seated cultural or tribal prejudice,

out of some ingrained sexism or racism.

Jesus had looked to get away for a break, some peace of mind, in Tyre.

What He discovered there instead was liberation.

He found Himself face-to-face with His own prejudice.

Ephphatha! Be opened!

The Christ in Him saw the Christ in her.

Namaste Squared.

Jesus changed.

Jesus the Teacher became Jesus the Student.

He changed his mind, his attitude, and even his daily practice of ministry.

He opened His mind.

As a matter of fact, after this encounter

Jesus began to reach out across cultural, tribal, racial and gender lines.

Jesus went through a spiritual process of spring cleaning,

a spiritual cleansing which led the Son of God to see

the need of his neighbors out there, over there, over yonder.

The Gospel has never been the same.

The World has never been the same.

After this encounter, every time we draw a line in the sand

the Christ in us seeks to erase racism and sexism and homophobia

and leads us into ever-deepening relationships with God and each other.

Ephphatha! Be opened!

For example, Jesus travelled from Tyre into Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee.

Sure, it was a meandering path, the GPS constantly recalculating.

Jesus remained true and faithful to God; so, what changed?

Could it have been the focus of his vision?

the range on his radar?

the broadening of his compassion?

Read your Bible and you will see that from that point forward in Mark,

Jesus grew from this experience to extend Grace to All People.

All people...all people will be drawn to God.

Not only Hebrews or the Chosen or the select from one tribe or nation or temple.

Not just some Children of God but all of God's children.

A kid approached a rabbi and asked permission to ask a question about the Torah.

When the rabbi said to go ahead and ask,

the young person said, *"The scriptures say here that the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea, and the children of Israel built the Temple, and the children of Israel did this, and they did that. Tell me, rabbi, didn't grown-ups ever do anything?"*

The Good News is that the One Who Created and Creates loves and redeems all people!

Jesus Himself changed and grew and moved into a higher state of Being,

one where he embodied passion and compassion

for the majority and the marginalized,

for the ones who feel at home

and those with no place to lay their heads.

If Jesus could do this, then how about His followers?

Be open! Be affirming of all people!

Look what happens when we cross over the chasms we dig and the walls we build

under and around our hearts and minds and nations.

The first thing we lose is our desperate hold on our presumptions and prejudices.

The first thing we take on is a tribe called the human race.

Look what happened to God's own after his life-changing experience.

Jesus' encounter with the Greek woman opened the way, the door, his heart

for an encounter with another soul in the next town in Sidon

whom He never would have ministered unto

if she had not shamed Jesus for his comments about crumbs.

"...When Jesus healed a deaf man,

He took the man aside, privately,

Away from gawkers

He took the man aside, apart, away

From the multitude. He put his fingers

Into the deaf-mute's ears. He spat

And touched his tongue...

He looked into heaven.

*He sighed and said, "**Ephphatha! Be opened!**"*

When his ears were opened

And his tongue released,

The [man] spoke plainly.

Of course.

Now that we have heard the event,

Do we understand it better?

*Of course not.
Let's start with something easier.
Try listening to what others say.
Say how you feel, and watch your tongue come untied.
Get somebody you can trust to practice on.
Try it on your own wife or husband,
Father, mother, brothers, sisters, children, friends.
You already know how to sigh.
Now learn to open up.
Ephphatha! Be opened!
See, that's all there is to it!"*

(By: William Staffen, from Imaging the Word)

God sees you.
God loves you.
God asks, "Are you ready for change?"

Would changing one's ways and attitudes and mind be any easier
if you knew that God has already done so?
Would it help if you trusted that the Holy Spirit is showing us the way?

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!