

September 8, 2024
Lectionary 23, Year B
The 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 7:24-37
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Be Opened

This morning, I'm going to do something I've never done before. I'm not going to preach on the first seven verses of this gospel reading. Instead, I'm going to preach on the last seven verses of the gospel reading, which I usually ignore when this reading comes up in the cycle.

I always preach on the first seven verses, because I know that they bother people. In them it seems like Jesus is being not just unkind, but actually rude to the gentile woman, who is pleading for her daughter's sanity; for her spiritual and mental well-being. Ultimately Jesus does the right thing in this reading, he does heal the woman's daughter, but he says the very wrong thing, he has the very wrong attitude. It's disturbing.

So, whenever this gospel reading comes up, because I know it troubles people, because I know it troubles me, I always preach on the first seven verses and ignore the rest of the gospel reading. You might have noticed, but the blurb I just read as an introduction to the gospel* also ignored the second half of the reading, it only talked about the Syrophenician woman and her daughter. It's kind of funny, because I've noticed a lot of the preaching commentaries that I have read on this passage do the exactly same thing. They ignore the healing of the deaf and mute man in the last seven verses of this reading and write their commentary only on the Syrophenician woman and her daughter and Jesus' interaction with them. So, I am not alone and we are not alone in thinking that Jesus' interaction with this woman needs to be grappled with, to the point of ignoring the rest of the gospel reading.

But not this year. If you'd like to know some of the things I've said about the first part of this gospel reading in the past, let me know. I'll send you some of my sermons on this reading from other years. But for now, let's look at the rest of this gospel reading, which so often gets ignored, while I and we try to rehabilitate Jesus from his unquestionably bad attitude.

What happens after Jesus' interaction with the woman? Jesus is still not on his home turf. He's still beyond the borders of Israel, in the Gentile area of the Decapolis. Why he spent time in Gentile country, why he went there in the first place, when his response to the Gentile's woman request for help for her daughter was that his understanding of his mission and his ministry was that it was for the Jews only, is a mystery. He had deliberately gone to a place where the majority of the people he would encounter would be non-Jews; gentiles. Perhaps he was traveling back to the territory of the Jews, but he was not there yet and while he was traveling, "they", whoever "they" were, brought him a man who was deaf, he couldn't hear, and who had a speech impediment, he couldn't speak. In this situation, there was no debate, no discussion, no argument about what could or could not be given to someone who was, presumably, also a Gentile. Instead, help was begged and it was given. Jesus took the man aside, in private, and put his fingers in his ears and touched his tongue, and said the unbinding word, "Ephphatha" and immediately the man could hear and he could speak.

Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what he had done, what he had done away from the crowd, in private, but the man and those who had brought him to Jesus ignored Jesus words, and they zealously shared the news about what Jesus had done saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." (Mark 7:37)

We have had an Ephphatha weekend here at Emmanuel. One that started months ago, actually in the hallway outside Kask Hall when Janice McHugh and I had a conversation during Fellowship Hour, standing by the Sunday School bulletin

board, about the declining attendance at Sunday School. The writing was on the wall, that it was time for a change. And so, we came up with the idea of having a brunch for the parents of children in our church, to ask them what would work for them, what we could do, what we could change to make it possible for them to bring their children to some kind of children's ministry. But first, we had to commit to ourselves that we wouldn't spend valuable time lamenting the fact that times have changed and that there is a lot more than church going on Sunday mornings and children and families are insanely busy. We had to commit to being "ephphatha," to going into the meeting with open ears and open minds, and really hearing what the parents said would work for their families, for their children.

So, that was what we did. We invited, we met, and we listened and out of that listening First Friday Faith Formation was born. We had the first one last night and almost 40 people came, including 11 kids and 5 teenagers. It was a great event. And it was born from listening, having open ears, open minds, believing that the story of Jesus is worth being told, needs to be told, to children, youth, and adults, and looking for ways to tell that story so that people can hear it. We want the kids and families to hear the story of Jesus, but first we had to listen to them.

When Britton and I went to Niagara Falls for our anniversary in August, we went to the American side, which is a New York State Park, and near the entrance of the park on the path to the falls there was a stand that had been put up by the Jehovah's Witnesses. They had pamphlets and two women standing there, ready to talk to people about their faith. Most people, including us, avoided the women and their stand of pamphlets, in fact, I think we might have even crossed over to the sidewalk on the other side of the road to avoid them, but when we passed them later in the day, I saw a family, husband, wife, and child in a stroller, there talking with them and taking their pamphlets. I wondered how long they had stood out there, on that warm day, nicely dressed with their pamphlets, before someone came and talked to them. I wondered how many people had talked to them, how many

people had taken their pamphlets. I thought about how unlikely it was that someone from any of the Lutheran churches I have ever been a part of, and that's a long list of churches, would put out a stand of pamphlets about the church at a state park and be there all day, to talk religion with people out there for a day's fun.

But then, yesterday, that's exactly what some people from Emmanuel did. We had a booth at Norwood Day, as we have done for years. We had a beanbag toss game and prizes and pamphlets about our church, and bookmarks and pencils to give away, and people from our congregation spent the whole day, in shifts, 8:30 in the morning to 3:30 in the afternoon out there interacting with our neighbors, and, as I like to think of it, planting seeds. Many people who stopped by our booth just played our game and got a prize, which in itself was a gift of grace, as the game was free and people could play until they got a beanbag into one of the holes and could have a prize. As a side note, we would let people pick a prize from our collection, even if they didn't get a beanbag into the hole, but most people wanted to do it, just to prove they could. It's harder than it looks.

Some people did stop by the information section of our booth, mostly, at least when I was there, asking where the church was, which we told them. The bookmarks and pencils we have out had our name on them and some had our address as well. We smiled, and said hello, we greeted our neighbors and welcomed them to our booth, and let people know that we are here. Worshipping God with joy, loving one another, serving all. And we let them know that they are welcome. And who knows. Maybe someday we'll see some of them again.

Because, that's the other thing about Ephphatha. About being open. It's about having our ears opened, so that we can hear the needs, hear the stories of our neighbors, but it's also about having our tongues loosed, opened to tell people about Jesus. About how Jesus has been with us in times of joy, gladdening our hearts, about how Jesus has been with us in our times of sickness and struggle and

sorrow, healing our brokenness, about how Jesus has been with us, walking with us on our journeys. And we're not always great at that. After all, we don't want people to think we're some kind of religious weirdos. And sometimes it's hard not to worry that, if we talk too much about church, if we talk too much about Jesus, we're going to be associated with the very worst versions of Christianity, hateful, judgmental, rigid, exclusionary, unforgiving.

After all, we've all heard the stories about the harm that some versions of Christianity can do. Perhaps some of us have even experienced that harm first hand. Perhaps we even see a version of that harm in the first part of today's gospel reading, the part that I'm ignoring, but not really. The part that starts with an in group and an out group. Knowing that that can be what Christianity looks like, from the outside looking in, or sometimes from the inside, can make it hard to speak about our faith. Sometimes it's actually easier to listen than to talk.

But today, and going forward, I want us to think about being "Ephphatha" people, about being opened. Open to listening to the experiences of others, in our congregation and beyond, and also open to speaking, to speaking about the presence of Jesus, the works of Jesus, in our own lives, in our world, in our church. I want us to imagine Jesus' prayer for the man deaf and mute being a prayer for us, individually and as a congregation.

Ephphatha. Be opened. Amen.

*In Mark's gospel, encounters with women usually signify turning points in Jesus' ministry. Here, a conversation with a Syrophenician woman marks the beginning of his mission to the Gentiles. (This Sunday's Gospel Introduction from SundaysandSeasons.com)