

Psalm 146 ~ Mark 7:24-37  
"Be Opened"  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost ~ Rally Day ~ September 8, 2024  
The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Scripture Reading:*

What a week! On Friday night in Brazil, the NFL season opened for our Green Bay Packers, in a game where Jordan Love made the longest touchdown pass of his career to Jayden Reed but injured his left knee before the game ended with the Eagles pulling out a win, 34-29. (Too soon?). On a much more serious note, this past week we experienced heart break and losses that go deep and wide. Events that make us ask hard questions to which there are no easy answers. Wednesday, while schools opened across the country filled with eager students and teachers from Pre-K through high school: two students and two teachers at Apalachee High School in Winder, Georgia, never made it home that afternoon because their lives were cut short by a 14-year-old with an AR-15 rifle. At the beginning of the week, Israeli officials recovered the bodies of six hostages in Gaza. Six younger adults who had survived almost eleven months in captivity, only to be killed in cold blood, while their release was being negotiated: sending Israel and most of the world into righteous outrage and unspeakable mourning.

After a week like that, surely today we are ready to hear an uplifting message of comfort and hope. We yearn to see again the power of God to heal and restore. Or to hear words of comfort from Jesus, like, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." Words that have the power to heal these hurts that go too deep for words. I have Good News for you: our old, old, new, new scripture will not disappoint or fail us today.

At the same time, I will warn you: this is not an easy lesson. The truth is, hardly any other gospel story triggers more sharp reactions than this one. When I read it, I'm sure you will see why. I invite you to be opened to the miracle just below the surface of these stories. It is there for us to see—if we expand the boundaries of our imaginations. Listen for what the Spirit has to say to you this day, from this old, old yet ever new story of Jesus and his love. It may be exactly what we need after the week we've had and the election season in the days ahead.

*Sermon:*

When was the last time you had an argument? On the way to church? Yesterday before lunch? I wonder if it was a repeat round of an old, old argument. Or perhaps a brand new one that burst out of nowhere. Who won? Who lost? Maybe it is still going, just simmering for the moment. The first story in the text you just heard, the one about Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is as sharp and surprising to our ears today, as the day it happened. In fact, given how strange and "uncharacteristic" of what we would expect or want Jesus to say, we can be quite sure it comes to us without much filtering. There have been plenty of biblical scholars that have tried to soften how Jesus comes off in this story: they suggest Jesus was testing her and was going to heal her daughter all along. Or they try to say that calling her a dog wasn't that bad, because the Greek is actually the word for puppy, a gentle tease, perhaps. Of course, we can't

know the mind of Jesus but based on the story before us and our knowledge of the culture, those explanations are a stretch that also dilute, distract, and otherwise lead us away from the miracle I believe that is being told here.

Some love this story; more people cringe at it. Whether you applaud the woman's quick wit, or you recoil at Jesus' dismissive response to her initial request, there is good news here. Pure gospel. But what does it teach us? For one, we can all learn from Jesus about how to lose an argument. What we do know from Mark's carefully wrought gospel is the following. We know that she was a Gentile, not a Jew. And we know that Jesus was way out of his territory, his home turf. Tyre and Sidon were far far north of Galilee. Jesus had gone up there to get away, to take a breather. It was supposed to be a respite journey for him.

Instead, a woman from Tyre, a foreigner, somehow heard he was in the neighborhood and decided to seize the moment. Just maybe he could help! We can imagine, and some of us have experienced first-hand the absolute desperation of a parent with a very ill child, in this case a mental illness. We know this is what drove her to find him. And we also know that dogs were *not* household, pampered pets for anyone in first century Palestine. They were seen as scavengers. To be called a dog was an insult, plain and simple. We do not know whether she was rich or poor. The story doesn't tell us. We do know that Tyre and Sidon were larger cities, the "elite" if you will, that depended on the peasant farmers, the Israelites in the country (like Jesus and his band of familiars) who produced their food. We know that by the time the Gospel of Mark was being written, the question of whether or not Gentiles were to be included among the Christ followers, was raging.

It's possible she was not a poor woman, as is commonly assumed, but from among the elite, and Jesus first response, to refuse to heal her daughter, was actually Jesus advocating for the poor and the marginalized who are the ones who have to live on crumbs. And here she was, a person from the elite, once again exerting her power to extract, in this case, a healing from this miracle healer Rabbi that somehow her sources had tipped her off that he was way up North, within range. No one really knows for sure, based on what the Bible tells us.

What we *do* know, is that Jesus lost the argument! And changed his mind and healed her daughter from a distance, without even seeing or touching her. Did you ever realize how losing an argument could produce such an amazing outcome? What we have before us is the briefest of lessons on how to argue productively. Whether you win or lose the argument. The first lesson comes from the woman. Notice how she does not get defensive or insulting. She did not take the bait and say something like, "How dare you call me a dog, you country bumpkin from Galilee!" Instead, she immediately adopted his language, taking in the meaning behind the insult, to help him see the other side. Her side, her perspective. And he did! He listened and seeing her perspective, changed his mind. Their argument appears to cause him to expand the bounds of his care beyond his original statement.

We have been looking at an ancient argument that led to a miraculous healing. And that was immediately followed by Jesus going North to go South (Sidon is actually 25 miles in the opposite direction of the Sea of Galilee). There he did another miraculous healing, but a very different one. He opened the ears and freed the tongue of another foreign Gentile, unable to hear or speak, have to do with us. Because a bunch of friends brought him to Jesus. What do these two miraculous healings have to do with us here today? Or as Sister Joan Chittister helpfully calls us to consider today's lesson: "What is it to follow the Gospel, in this situation, now, in this place?"<sup>i</sup>

Here's the connection that I see. The Good News of Jesus' love has the power to cross boundaries and bust up prejudices that divide, diminish, and derail us. Let's go back to the question at the beginning of my sermon: With whom do you (or did you) have an argument recently? You may have a person in your life or people you love that you choose to avoid hard conversations. People you know, who have a different perspective than yours. People who will vote differently than you do. People who spend their money and time in ways you just can't understand. People who listen to TV stations and scroll social media sites you would never open. If you think about it, our smart phones are making us dumber, in the sense of leading us to become narrower minded, more hunkered down on our opinions, than before smart phones. Back when we had to talk to each other and watch the same programs on our TVs at the same time.

Jesus' Aramaic, and strange sounding word to the man he healed and today to us, is: *ephphatha!* This word means "Be opened!" And that one word, says it all! In our text, it is Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, translated into Greek, crossing that boundary between Jew and Gentile. One word that means, "Be opened!" The word he said as he touched with his hands and his own saliva a man so he could hear and speak again. It's possible that as he sighed and looked up to heaven and said *ephphatha!* He was praying also that the power of God's surpassing love would be opened to all, everywhere. Not only to the man he was healing. It is certainly a word we need to hear today to give us courage. To call us to cross boundaries we have set up and engage in hard conversations. Jesus did and so can we. Hard conversations are necessary to forge a healing path. Between two people who are arguing. Between two groups, two factions, two countries. My we also hear this healing word from Jesus for ourselves as individuals regarding internal arguments that may be tearing us up quietly inside ourselves.

Hard conversations take courage and practice. We need to hone our skills: to Listen up and to Speak up!! Our Outreach Committee is pondering the possibility of offering some chances for us to practice "respectful conversations" here at church this fall. As Charles Duhigg has written in his book, *Supercommunicators*, to begin with it is important to "acknowledge that this will be uncomfortable. We may misspeak. We may ask naïve questions. When those discomforts emerge, we won't shut down. Rather, we'll see them as opportunities to learn."<sup>ii</sup> Take a page from Jesus' book! Argue thoughtfully and well. And see what the Holy Spirit can do! We worship a boundary-breaking, prejudice-busting God, whose mercy and power we are just beginning to tap. Jesus wants us to "go big" and "go home." Home to wholeness and life.

I am going to end this sermon with another question, verging on a dare. What is the most audacious prayer you can think of? The biggest argument, the worst problem, the biggest block you are facing in your life, or you see us facing as a community, a nation, or the world. I am going to give us all a few seconds of silent prayer to let your answer to this question, the biggest argument, the worst problem, the biggest block you are facing in your life bubble up in your heart: and then pray that audacious prayer to Jesus, that it “be opened.”

...Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Joan Chittister, *The Monastic Heart: 50 Simple Practices for a Contemplative and Fulfilling Life*, (Convergent: NY, NY, 2021) p.135.

<sup>ii</sup> Charles Duhigg, *Supercommunicators: How to Unlock the Secret of Language Connection*, (Random House: New York, NY, 2024), p.232