

“Open Up!”

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Psalm 125

Mark 7.24-37

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In our world we have been hearing new sounds – it is the sound of silences being broken. For years – decades – generations – people have been silenced. Women who have been harassed have been told to keep quiet. Black people who have suffered microaggressions and blatant racism and brutality refuse to stay silent. Minorities, outsiders, and anyone who dares speak the difficult truth within society have been silenced. Their silence has been enforced by those in power. All around the world, though, the silence has been broken. The social expectations and mores have been shattered. The elephant in the room is being named.

Of course, that is not to say that there haven't been people speaking up all along. There have always been people fighting for justice. There have always been people shouting words of truth. I think these broken silences also come in waves, and lately it seems there is more unity in the voices that have been silenced. I also think it has to do with whether those who have power and privilege are willing to hear those who have been silenced – to step aside and recognize the humanity and dignity of those being oppressed. It sometimes depends on if people are willing to open up to what is being said. It also means that those with power and privilege are willing to stand in solidarity with those who have been silenced.

Silence can be positive. We need silence to rejuvenate, to listen, and to give space. Yet, when the silencing is used to harm others, silence becomes a weapon instead of a source of healing. Our Gospel reading for today is about breaking silences.

Jesus has been healing. Last week we read the passages preceding this week's scripture. Jesus was breaking boundaries as he ate with sinners and outcasts. People were worried because he was eating with the disciples who were considered “unclean.” He now moves into a new part of Galilee, as the Gospel of Mark has Jesus traveling quickly from one place to another. Dr. Deborah Krause of Eden Theological Seminary, suggests that in the Gospel of Mark he is moving to challenge the boundaries and borders set up by society. He is redefining society.

Yet, challenging the system is exhausting work. To always be opposing the way the world works can take it out of someone. He has gone off to rest and find some much needed alone time. Although, a woman approaches him. She is not just any woman, she is a Syrophenician woman. This same story is told in Matthew, but she is Canaanite in that passage. All of that is to say that she was different and that most people would have ignored her because of her difference.

This unique and wonderful woman has heard that Jesus has been healing. His reputation has preceded him and she encounters him and sees this as an opportunity. Her daughter is not well and the mother asks for healing. She asks Jesus for a moment of his time.

Jesus responds to her by saying: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” This is a pretty harsh statement. He called her a dog. Some translators and commentators over the years have tried to soften this passage and say that Jesus was calling her a “puppy” or a “pet.” Isn’t that cute? Though, I think assuming that is like saying it’s ok to call a woman “broad” or “honey” or “lady.” Part of it depends on the context. I have known many men who have addressed me as “lady” – sometimes it is a term of endearment. Yet, when someone calls me a “lady pastor” I know it is a loaded term – it assumes that “pastor” is male and that a feminine term has to be added. The same applies for people who say, “male nurse,” assuming that nursing is a feminine job.

Jesus is calling this woman a dog. Why would he do this? Rev. Jill Duffield, a PCUSA minister, puts her feelings honestly about this scripture passage. She writes: “I need Jesus to be anything other than dismissive and mean-spirited, and yet I can’t just give my Lord a pass on this troubling exchange.” Some want to soften this passage and make it so that he called this woman a “puppy” because that is easier to unpack. To say he insulted her brings up some struggles that we have to deal with – some questions about our theology and about who Jesus is as fully human and fully divine.

Perhaps we could say that Jesus had a “human moment.”¹ He has been working so hard and is incredibly exhausted – maybe he just needed five seconds to himself and the woman caught him in an off moment. We have all had those moments, where we have worked very hard – maybe you’ve been teaching and grading papers all day or you have been dealing with a stressful family situation or you have been doing something that you love, but you just haven’t had a moment to sit down. Then, a student knocks on your door, or a friend comes and asks for more of you, or someone catches you off guard, and all you want to do is sit down, put your feet up, and catch your breath. I imagine this is how Jesus felt as this woman approaches him. Could we say that Jesus had a flub up and called her a bad name? Does that make him sinless? Would it be terrible to say that maybe Jesus had human moments? Perhaps Jesus could be growing into his own understanding of divinity in the world.

This woman does not seem phased by Jesus’ comments, though. She will not be denied. She does not care about the social expectations of her as a woman or as a Syrophenician – she goes for this and goes all in. As the dean of Duke Divinity Chapel, Luke Powery writes about this passage: “Silence is not an option, only salvation and healing. She believes that her daughter, a human being, deserves healing – health care – like any other human being.”² The world expects her to sit silently while her child suffers, but she breaks that silence. She approaches Jesus and demands that he see her child. She reminds Jesus that even the dogs eat the crumbs. If the dogs are the Syrophenicians, or this woman, she is telling him that even they should receive what is left over of the healing – that they should not be shoved aside.

Something in this sentence strikes Jesus and he agrees. He heals the girl and she is restored to the community. If Jesus was recovering from doing too much and expending too

¹ Loye Bradley Ashton, “Mark 7.24-37” in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 46.

² Luke A. Powery, “Living By the Word” in *The Christian Century*, Vol. 134, No. 16, August 2, 2017, p. 18.

much mental and physical energy in his ministry, he finds this experience to be one that opens him up to new possibilities, because he changed his mind and healed the girl. Once more, Powery writes: “The truth opens the door to freedom.”³ Perhaps this healing led Jesus to the next healing, which we go on to read.

The crowd brings Jesus a man who cannot hear and has a speech impediment. The Yiddish word (not a language that is in the Bible, but I think might be helpful here) for silence is “shtum.” It literally means silence, but can also mean “non-communicative.” By that definition, many people would have a speech impediment. We all have moments of shtum – of silence, of not being able to communicate, whether because we are speechless, or because we have been forced into silence, or simply because we have no words. I wonder if this man wants to be “healed.” The crowd is the one insisting – the man never asks to be healed. What one person sees as a “disability” another person may see as an everyday way of life.

Jesus takes this man aside. He uses spittle on his eyes and ears and says, “Ephphatha,” which means to “be opened.” We definitely see that Jesus has “opened” this man’s ears and eyes, but perhaps he is opening more than that. He is opening communication between the man and the crowd. He is opening the community and their minds to what is “normal” and how to welcome people.⁴ Jesus has become more open since his encounter with the Syrophenician woman, and is encouraging others to do the same.

Jesus is calling us to be open to one another – not just the people in this room, but to the world. We must be open to those who are different from us – politically, socially, emotionally, physically, religiously, and more. Though, this means that we have to think outside the box of what a faith community looks like. It means being open to people who think differently, who look different, and who act different. It might mean changing how we address people. It might mean we change activities that we do to include more people.

The only way we can make a change is with God’s strength. God is opening more ears and eyes in Isaiah, which might have been literal or it might have been metaphorical. The people in Isaiah’s passage are fearful. They had been in the wilderness, exiled from their familiar homes and families, and God is telling them to trust and to see that God is doing a new thing. They do not have to act out of fear. Yet, we cannot change without God.

We have so much fear in our world right now. When people act out of fear we are not acting at our best. Healing doesn’t mean “fixing” one person or one problem – it is healing the whole community and being willing to listen and move ahead with God’s help. Amen.

³ Ibid., 18.

⁴ Amy C. Howe 46