

Isaiah 35:4-7a  
Psalm 146  
James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17  
Mark 7:24-37

The Rev. Laura Palmer  
St. Martin-in-the-Fields  
Year B Proper 18  
September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024

### **Be Opened**

Come Holy Spirit come; and may we continually be opened into new life and see your purpose for us in ways we might not have imagined. AMEN

The hospital where I worked for eleven and a half years was an exquisite teacher. I learned, grew, and changed, often in the face of scalding trauma and suffering.

One might think that being a genocide survivor might cut you a break, but no. I kept a mental list of those people who could make me an atheist if I didn't already believe and this desperate mother was at the top.

This woman, as well as her husband, had somehow survived the genocide in Cambodia as young children during the Pol Pot years when nearly three million people were murdered or died from starvation in the 70s.

During a family meeting in which I was present as the chaplain, doctors told the mother that her teenage daughter was going to die.

Bad news is usually conveyed in small rooms in hospitals with nothing on the wall. There's no escape. You're sitting within a few feet of each other.

When the words were spoken, her screams filled the small space. It felt like the oxygen in the room was gone. She fell to the ground, prostrating herself before the physicians. "How much money do you need? Tell me. Tell me and I will get it for you if you make my daughter live."

We sat in paralyzed silence until her fury was spent. A cruel fact you learn in a hospital: No one can scream forever.

Finally, a doctor was able to say: Money wasn't the issue, her daughter's disease was.

This is the woman who comes to me every time I hear the story of the Syrophenician woman.

An exhausted Jesus, our gospel tells us this morning, went to a house in Tyre and "did not want anyone to know he was there." His friend had been beheaded, he fed thousands, walked on water to calm his disciples' fears, instructed the Pharisees, and finally just needed to be alone and rest.

Who can't imagine the welcome of a silent house and the anticipation of the comfort of silence and rest?

Christianity is distinct of the three major religions because of the incarnation. Yet we often fail to think about the utterly human needs Jesus had. Sleep. Silence. Rest.

Now when he thinks he is finally alone—away from even his disciples—who bursts into the house: a powerless, marginalized, nameless woman who, out of options to save her daughter, crashed into the room and pleaded with the one person who might help: Jesus.

And what does he do but lash out at her with a cruel and ugly retort, dismissing her as unworthy.

She does not flinch: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then, silence, a silence that still echoes through the millennium. Imagine what she felt in that moment and then, Jesus.

"Silence is God's first language," wrote the 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic, St. John of the Cross. It is in this silence that we can hear Jesus change. And it's a silence that if we really listen has the power to change us, too.

"You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do," writes priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor, adding,

"The Syrophenician woman's faith and persistence teach him that God's purpose for him "is bigger than he had imagined, that there is enough of him to go around."

Jesus touches the third rail of his unconscious bias. It's in each of us too. Those we somehow have been conditioned to think of as "othered" whether by sex, race, gender, or all the otherness our divisive world has carved out. We never quite realize what lies buried in the hulls of our psyches until something or someone calls us up short and a chamber of our heart breaks open that we didn't even realize has been hardened and shut.

Sometimes we are opened and transformed by prayer and meditation. We pray to be opened or to change but have little to say about how or when that happens. But our faith assures us that it will.

It's unsettling (at the very least) to collide with one's own biases. I remember a man I met from West Virginia; arms covered in tattoos. My quick assumptions led me one way; my curiosity, another. I asked about his tattoos. He explained that each was in honor of someone he loved who died in the opioid epidemic. We met because his 4 yr. old had a potentially fatal disease.

My quick biases about his politics were overrun by my compassion for the quicksand of his grief. My heart opened.

Jesus was opened too, as we are reminded in the rest of Mark's gospel today. One hopes Jesus had some rest before he ventured on into the region of the Decapolis—Gentile territory—where he healed a deaf man by putting his fingers in his ears and touching his tongue. We are told,

“Sighing, he looked to heaven and said ‘Ephphatha,’ that is ‘be opened.’”

He told the crowd to tell no one but that failed. And each time that happened, he drew closer to death. For minus weapons, armies, and territory under his control, the only power Jesus had that the emperor did not was his miraculous healing power.

God had once again acted through a powerless, nameless, marginalized person—a woman—and Jesus’ heart was opened and he could hear more fully God’s call to him to expand the scope of his ministry and love. It was for all of us and yet it does not stop with any of us.

If we are truly to be his followers, we have to step outside our comfort zones to embrace the moments when it happens unexpectedly and realize that we, too, are called to throw open our shuttered hearts and make a place at the table for all.

Week after week we kneel and sit at God’s table. No one is excluded in this church from receiving the sacrament. May we continue to “be opened” by the enormity of its gift and pray that empowered by its love we find new ways to tear down the barriers of hate and division wherever we find them in our families, our city, and our world.

Amen.