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St. Thomas Church
9.5.21; Pent. 15B
Prov. 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23;
James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mk
7:24-37

BE OPENED!

Today's gospel reading reveals a message to us that could not be timelier as we once again face the threat of activities we love and cherish shutting down. This morning's gospel reading is just what we need to hear about: Jesus' power to open things up. Yes, really open things up! At first glance the two stories contained in the gospel reading do not appear to be very strongly connected. But as we dive a little deeper, and I promise you we will, we see that they are strongly linked together as both point to the power released in our lives when we are opened long enough, wide enough, deep enough to be transformed by God penetrating Spirit of Love.

Let's start with the courageous Syrophenician mother who begs Jesus to deliver her young daughter from a demon. This is an extraordinary story. For a woman in that time and place to courageously enter a presumably empty house with a man—a Rabbi-- of a different ethnicity and religion was nothing short of miraculous. It simply was not done. Can you imagine the desperation that she must have felt to take that kind of risk? She opened herself up in a way that made her vulnerable to insult, rejection, and injury. And yet she does it anyway.

And Jesus. And Jesus. Just how open was he to her in that moment? Some of you may regard his calloused and judgmental response as the opposite of what his mission of "love your neighbor as yourself" was all about. This principle at stake is what the writer of the book of James calls "the royal law" and is foundational to the Christian faith. It cannot be easily side-stepped.

Some bible scholars have attempted to soften it by noting that the dogs referred to were really the kind of beloved household pets that many of us love and cherish. Or perhaps it was just a well known saying and proverb of the time—much like our saying, “Don’t worry about him, his bark is worse than his bite.” None of these explanations are very satisfying to me.

If we take seriously the fact that Jesus was fully human and that he, too, like us, was attempting to live into his divinity then it makes sense that he, at that moment, was not yet freed from the negative assumptions and stereotypes of his day that Jews and Gentiles made about each other. It is also important to remember that at the time Mark recorded these stories the early church was hotly divided on the issue of inclusivity just like today.

So, did Jesus make a horrible pastoral response? Can I actually ask that question? Probably not and sleep well tonight! But I can say that in the course of his dialogue with this amazing woman Jesus learned how to listen and to challenge his own assumptions. Jesus was transformed by the conversation and allowed openness to replace the narrow-mindedness and short-sightedness of the culture he was born into. Jesus allowed himself to be changed by what he heard from this gutsy, persistent, counter-his-culture mother from the region Tyre. Jesus allowed this marginalized woman to become a leader.

I know many of us, in the wake of beloved rector’s recent retirement, are wondering what kind of pastoral leaders God will bring to us here at St. Thomas in the future. I say leaders (plural) because first we will call an interim priest-in-charge and then finally a rector as part of a more permanent call. Some of you might be wondering if I might be slipping seamlessly into those roles. My answer is simple. As John the Baptist once said regarding the coming of the messiah, “It is not me: prepare for another.” Dear friends, I am not a candidate for these positions but let

me reassure you that I am here to help support all of you through this transition as well as all of our staff.

At the top of my wish list for a pastoral leader is one open to change, open to feedback, isn't threatened when appropriately challenged by differing viewpoints, and is committed to the creation of a culturally diverse congregation. I yearn for our congregation to reflect the diversity of God's people found in this world and in heaven, our ultimate destination. Jesus models for us the way forward in this gospel reading by highlighting the importance of leadership being open to the kind of spiritual discernment that requires that we see things from multiple perspectives and to fulfill God's grander vision of an inclusive Church.

The process of faithful, respectful, authentic, intercultural dialogue is tough, challenging, and demanding but if it done with an open heart, it can bear fruits of healing and reconciliation. It is important to note that in our encounters with others if we are not listening with the possibility of being changed by what we hear, we are not truly listening. The story of Jesus in dialogue with the Syrophenician woman is an exemplary model of this process of changing the paradigm. When this dear mother got home to find her daughter completely well, I am quite sure she felt that she not only had she encountered a great leader and teacher in Jesus but that a bridge between the Gentile and Jew worlds had grown a little stronger.

I feel inspired and challenged by the Gospel. I bet you do too. I am trying to live into this gospel story myself when I attempt to listen to the strong, vocal objections of parents who do not want their teens to be vaccinated or their younger children masked even when I believe it could save lives. I experience something bigger than just a disagreement. I experience a cultural divide—like visiting another country—like the Galilean Jesus crossing geographic and cultural boundaries to meet the Syrophenician woman. I ask myself can I listen to them without treating or viewing them as less than human—a dog if

you will. Can they listen to me without treating me as less than human? Can you listen to them? Can they listen to you? This gospel story is a living parable for our day.

But there is more for us to consider. The second story involving the deaf man being brought to Jesus by his friends brings the power of being and remaining open into even sharper focus. Like the first story, we might be surprised and a little uneasy about Jesus' response to the cry for help. When was the last time you allowed your healthcare professional to spit on their hands and touch your tongue? It was an accepted healing ritual back in the ancient near east but not today. But it does show how the ability to properly hear and properly speak are connected.

Even for us who do not have a medical challenge the spiritual truth still is revealed: if we can't hear correctly, we certainly can't speak correctly. There is a strong parallel between the journey of the deaf man and our own struggle to be authentic disciples of Christ. It is not easy to let Jesus touch us in an intimate way to grow our spiritual capacity to hear, speak, and proclaim our Lord's deep desire to help others, and ourselves, give birth to true identities, true voices, and rightful places in the Kingdom of God.

Just this past week I had a powerful reminder of this when I spoke to a friend recently who had gone through a sex change (aka a gender confirming surgery) and now has been ordained as a priest in another Christian denomination. When I began my friendship two years ago, I had no idea that this was the direction that my friend needed to go. To be completely transparent, I don't fully understand my friend's journey and call, but I am committed to practicing the living prayer that Jesus taught the deaf man and invites all of us to pray, "Ephphatha" that is, "be open."

If you are open to God and open with God, God will present you with the all the opportunities you need to learn and practice "Ephphatha." That beautiful Aramaic prayer (said in the mother tongue of Jesus)

invites us to let go of all our assumptions and judgments so that we and others might be healed and made whole. Today I put forth Jesus' invitation and challenge for all of us to open up to the healing presence of God wherever it may be found. Open up to new leadership and ways of doing things at St. Thomas. Open up to new callings and possibilities for your work and family lives. Open up to the possibility that God may be wanting you to sponsor an Afghan refugee. Open up to a call to be open to who you really are. An openness to seeing that God is still speaking and doing something in this world though we might on any given day see it as going to hell in a handbasket. And most of all be open to seeing the world as God sees it—a place of original blessing where Jesus has done everything well: making the deaf to hear and those without voice to speak.” Amen.