

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena, IL  
September 9, 2012

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell  
**"Ephphatha"**  
Text -Mark 7: 24-37

Ephphatha. Ephphatha. Not a word that easily rolls off the tongue. It tickles a bit. And feels like a lisp. It is Aramaic, or a Greek translation of Aramaic – a word used just this one time in the Gospels. Jesus sticks his fingers in a deaf man's ears, spits and touches the man's tongue. Then he sighs, looks up to the heavens, and utters, "Ephphatha." "Be opened." How odd.

A historical sidebar: in early Christian life, maybe even earlier than the Councils of Nicaea, a number of practices were incorporated into the baptismal rite and lasted through the middle ages. The priest placed fingers in the ears of the one being baptized and saliva on the tongue, though at some point, the saliva was replaced with salt. There was an abundance of fragrant oil – used in two acts of exorcism as well as in the chrismation. There was a lighted baptismal candle signifying the light of Christ – and, of course, the water. Preferably lots of warm, running water. But if that wasn't available, any water would do. The idea, I think, was to awaken all of the senses to this new life in Christ.

Martin Luther and other more radical reformers stripped down and "purified" the rite, possibly believing that this seemed too much like a magic act. Only the water is universal today – and in some traditions like ours, the anointing with oil and the lighted baptismal candle.

Well, our double Gospel story today is not about baptism. It is about healing and miracles. A deaf man receives his hearing and his voice. A young daughter is freed of an unclean spirit – eventually.

But I believe that the real miracle here is a miracle of ephphatha, of being opened. Certainly that is true of the deaf man as he comes alive to the sounds around him and is able to respond. But it was also an opening of Jesus. Yes, you heard me right. It was a miracle of opening the ears – and the mind and heart – of Jesus.

This first story is a hard one for us, accustomed as we are to the Jesus of infinite patience and compassion for the downtrodden, the sick, and the possessed. We don't expect the avoidance, the annoyance that we see him exhibit here with this Syro-Phoenician woman. Even though he is tired, wanting to have some time to be alone and anonymous, we are surprised and disturbed at how he treats her.

This day he has gone to Tyre and Sidon, crossing the barrier into Gentile territory. And when the woman approaches him in her desperation, she is not meek and groveling but bold and insistent. Jesus says, "Can't help you. I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel, not to

people like you.” Jesus says one of the cruelest things imaginable. He essentially calls her a dog! Says it wouldn’t be fair to give her what rightfully belongs to his people. We know what it would mean to call someone a dog today. It wasn’t any better in Jesus’ time. It was – and is – a nasty insult.

Then comes the stunner! She rolls with it. She doesn’t run off in a huff but says, “Yeah, I guess I am a dog in your mind – a woman, a Gentile, unclean – a double dog. But that doesn’t mean there’s nothing for me. Even the dogs get the crumbs that nobody else wants.” With that, Jesus grants her desire.

What do you suppose made the difference with Jesus? Was it her persistence? Her belief in his ability to help her? Her desperation about her daughter’s health that is so intense, that she is willing to endure humiliation, an assault on her being? Or maybe it’s just his surprise that someone has bested his argument.

Just what kind of Jesus is this that we find in these short seven verses? In confirmation classes, we learned from the ancient Christian creeds that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. If it is the divinity that is most important to you – “Jesus, the same yesterday, today, and forever” – if that is what your faith clings to, this is not your story. It may profoundly rattle you. You may want to explain it away – Jesus was just testing the woman; Jesus was just setting up a lesson for the disciples, leading them to understand that his ministry was broader. But even so, it was cruel.

I believe that this is a story of the humanity of Jesus. So human as to exhibit many of our foibles, being vulnerable. But it is more than just overreacting out of fatigue. More even than narrowly circumscribing his call, his perceived task of ministry and mission. No, a very human part of this story is that *Jesus was changed!* This woman *changed him*, opened his ears and his mind, shook him out of his narrow focus and opened up the world to him. He was here for all people! All lost sheep, not just the Jews.

Maybe he had just forgotten or lost track of that. Maybe he was even still growing in his ministry! This woman made a difference in Jesus’ life. This is the reverse of most gospel stories, isn’t it, where Jesus is the one making the difference?

I often hear stories from people about how they have come to make the big decisions in their lives, particularly those related to their faith. For some, it is how they came to understand that they were being called to ministry. For some, it is the decision to make a public affirmation of faith by being confirmed or received into the church. Many say that it was through people they encountered – those who were placed in their paths.

This is been true for me as well. Sometimes it is the friends, the teachers, the family members who teach us or who inspire us with how they live their lives. But often it is the strangers that we encounter. Those unlike ourselves, those with difficult, heart-wrenching stories to tell. Those who we might prefer to overlook or who we cross the street to avoid.

That's why I believe two things with all my heart. First, we need to tell our stories. Especially our stories about our faith – or about our doubts. Get over our reluctance or embarrassment or our sense that we have nothing of import to say. We learn from each other. We learn that we are not alone. Or in hearing another's story, we may come to understand an experience in a new and different way.

And, our outreach needs to reach beyond writing checks and into places where we meet and interact with those in different circumstances, walking and talking with them, hearing their stories and being in relationship. As I say this, I recognize that I don't do this as often as I should. It is far too easy to get in the rut of habits and distracted by the everyday tasks and challenges. It is hard to move out of my comfort zone. I also know how easy it is to get overwhelmed by the terrible things that happen in the world, that we see in our newspapers and on television. After a while, turning the page or hitting the "off" button is all I can do. This is far different from actually experiencing another environment, seeing up close for myself how much of the world lives.

Both Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman were out of their comfort zones. Jesus was in the land of the Gentiles, away from the lost sheep of Israel. The woman, though in her own land, dared to approach a man, one of the enemy, and ask a favor. A life-saving favor. Even if this was very uncomfortable with no predictable outcome. Even if she was blown off or humiliated, it was worth the risk. And look what she did! She not only got what she wanted – her daughter's healing. She might well have changed the course of history by opening up Jesus' ministry to all people. Even the man whose hearing was restored was probably out of his comfort zone! Imagine what it might be like to emerge from silence to all of the noise and chatter of the world!

While I certainly don't expect to change history with forays into new and demanding places, I do know that it is often when we are out of our own territory – our comfort zones – that we are able to see differently. It is in those places where we rub up against the unfamiliar, even discomfort or hardship, that space is opened where the Holy Spirit can move.

The question is, then, what do we do with our new encounters and experiences? Do we cling as best we can to our comfort level, or just barely endure the difficulties holding the intense feelings at arms length? Or will we dare to open our ears and eyes and hearts, see and touch and feel the whole expanse of human experience – the joy, the tragedy, the poverty of material goods, but the richness of love and relationships? And will these experiences come to an end like a memory that fades away with the photographs forgotten in an album? Or will we never be the same again because someone has been placed in our path to open us? Ephphatha. Be opened.

Amen and amen.