

Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23
Psalm 125
James 2:1-17
Mark 7:24-37

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To Be Opened

There are such riches in our scripture today. From Proverbs: *A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.* From James: *For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?* And from Mark's gospel: *"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*

Sometimes, scripture comes right alongside the realities of our lives. Sometimes we really have to wrestle to be able to make meaning of it. Wrestling with scripture takes many forms for those of us who do that wrestling. When the scriptures don't seem to present anything interesting or relevant to our lives, I have to work very hard to find something meaningful to say. And when every single reading is so rich and poignant that all of it clamors for our attention, it's hard to know what to do. That's how I feel today. All of the readings are rich and worthy of our attention. Thankfully, there is a beautiful thread that runs through all of them, a thread that opens up a very rich conversation about inclusion and exclusion, about being inward facing or outward facing, about God's mission in the world, and about our place in that mission. Everything being asked of us in these passages has to do with opening ourselves up to the realities of the world around us and to the realities of the thoughts of our own hearts.

Ephphatha. Be opened.

It's what Jesus said after putting his fingers in the deaf man's ears. Be opened. I wonder if those would have been his words if he'd not just had that startling encounter with the Syrophenician woman? Because in some way, that's what the woman was asking of Jesus. To be opened. It was a strange encounter, and difficult for us to take in. It seems incomprehensible that the Jesus who gave us the single new commandment to love one another as he loved us, is the same Jesus who spoke so cruelly to a mother desperate to save her child, a mother who fell at his feet in a posture of worship, a mother who knew Jesus could heal her precious daughter.

We can try to make sense of his response to her, to justify it so that Jesus continues to fit our limited idea of him. We know that Jesus wanted to be alone, presumably to rest, to pray, to have a moment of peace. He had just come from Gennesaret where he'd healed every sick person to be found, and then walked nearly 40 miles to Tyre. The fully human Jesus needed to

rest. Add to that, he was completely out of his element, far away from Jewish territory, deep into Gentile territory. It's interesting that he went there, because at this point in time, Jesus thought his ministry was only to the lost sheep of Israel and not to the Gentiles. And because that was so, it might just be that he thought he could go to the land of the Gentiles and not be recognized, not be seen, not be clamored after and compelled to heal and care for and minister to people over and over and over again. And yet none of those things takes away the sting of the cruel and dehumanizing words Jesus spoke. I can't explain it away for you. I don't have the answer. Jesus is fully human. Jesus is fully divine. We expect him to be perfect in every thought, word and deed, to be fully God from birth, fully formed and utterly divine from the get-go. Fully human, yes. But of course, fully divine. What we hear today seems otherwise.

This reading compels us to contemplate Jesus fully human, Jesus fully divine. It insists that no matter how much biblical scholarship or social science research we engage, we simply cannot see through the lens of anyone living anywhere in the first century Palestinian world. While I cannot know, I think it might be possible that as Jesus' ministry was developing, he was developing too. Maybe that's why he always said the kingdom of heaven had come among us, even when things didn't look like the kingdom of heaven at all. Maybe it's because we need to see that our relationship with God isn't a one-way street, that while encountering God surely has an impact on our lives, God encountering us might have an impact on God too.

There is so much to be learned from this Syrophoenician woman's faith. She was an outsider in so many ways, and her "outsiderness" becomes the source of some very powerful teaching. She showed Jesus, as she shows us, how the people outside our inner circles, people who are different from us can grow us and change us and give us entirely new perspectives on the world and the people around us. Sometimes those people will speak up, but mostly they won't and so we need to invite them into the conversation. I'm sure there were a hundred women who knew Jesus could heal them and the ones they loved, but they couldn't give voice to their believing. There are times when we need to quiet our own voices and invite the voices we think we don't want to hear.

Jesus likely never would have seen that woman if she hadn't so desperately sought him out. That's often how it is with strangers, or people on the margins, or even people who just don't seem a lot like us. We simply don't see them. And one of the most heartbreaking things about that is when we don't look, don't listen, don't pay attention, when we're not curious about the people who aren't like us, we lose the most amazing opportunities to learn the things we could never learn from the ones who are just like us.

That strange unnamed woman, a mother who loved her little girl so much that she literally risked her life for her, has lessons for us that are not to be missed.

Going to the ends of the earth for the sake of love is what Jesus taught.

I can't help but think this strange woman had something to do with helping him learn that. And I can't help but think that who we are and what we do and how we do, or don't love, somehow touches God's heart.

No matter how uncomfortable Jesus' bad behavior makes us, we need to look at it and learn from it. This is the only place I know of in scripture where somebody other than Jesus wins the argument. And she "wins" because she uses Jesus' own way of love on him. She "wins" because she's willing to give her life away for another.

She "wins" because she knows when people are treated like dogs, everyone suffers.

She "wins" because she had the courage to respectfully push back and say all that, to Jesus.

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It's only a few verses before we get back to a more comfortable story, the one where Jesus starts acting like himself again by making another happy, healing miracle. But it's important not to leave the discomfort of a God who is actually impacted by what we do or don't do, behind.

It makes for a lot more responsibility than we might like, but then that's what happens when we take God seriously. Prayers, good intentions, even profound faith alone don't change the world.

The world will only change, God's kingdom will only come, when we do what we say we believe.

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Ephphatha. Be opened.

It's not lost on me that it's only after his encounter with that brave Syrophenician mother, that Jesus says those words.

I think she helped him learn something of what it was to be opened, to be vulnerable, to be changed, even transformed. Ephphatha. Be opened, Jesus said, because being open, being vulnerable, being present to what is really happening in the world around us and the world inside of us is the only way we can speak the living word of the living God into a world that is desperate for God's justice and mercy and love.

Ephphatha. Be opened.

Be opened to receive all that you need.

You see it is only when we have been cracked open that we are able to receive the stunning gift of God's amazing grace, grace that so often comes to us in unexpected ways. Be open, be curious, be willing to be changed. Jesus allowed himself to be changed, when something shocking and unexpected happened.

Sometimes when something shocking and unexpected happens, there is nothing to do but be changed and to return to love.

It's what we're all meant to do. To be opened, to be changed, to love.

Ephphatha. Be opened.

Be open to looking outward rather than inward, to inviting rather than excluding, to curiosity rather than certainty, to God's mission rather than our own. Be open to learning and loving in ways you might never have imagined if you hadn't allowed yourself to be confronted by things you never, in your wildest imaginings, could have dreamed.

Ephphatha. Be opened. Amen