



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

September 5, 2021
The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children and Family Ministry*
on
Isaiah 35:4-7a and Mark 7:24-37
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Ephphatha: *Be opened.*

These past weeks have filled our minds, and our lives, with desperate scenes of people wading through water, sorting through debris for remnants of a lost home, sitting or standing on bus seats just so they do not get swept away, and of course people clinging to planes in the hope that they may be taken to freedom. Many images of what may be called natural, as well as disasters of our own human making, have been accompanied by people taking desperate measures for desperate times. They have displayed actions that are far removed from measured, carefully planned patterns of predictable activity, or the usual rules and sensibilities, as their lives are turned into disarray, and they are clearly urged by an overwhelming sense of flight, of fear.

Today the lectionary brings before us the story of the unnamed Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-37). A gentle woman on the edge, cast out and who is motivated to go to great lengths to seek a cure, an answer and end to the shame and pain of exclusion, as well as physical demands of her daughter's possession. A woman who takes desperate measures and too gives us a message of hope for those moments in life when we too are driven by desperation or are struggling with life, and indeed our faith.

This woman approaches Jesus without a personal invitation to eat, or come down from a tree, or come to tea but takes it upon herself to go in boldly, to see him, to seek Jesus and to find him, as she does with her whole heart. To seek Jesus who on this occasion it seems is simply trying to find some peace and quiet, only to be interrupted not with the subtlety of someone touching the hem of his garment, rather a forceful, confident presence in this woman who has come to claim his promise. She approaches him with the same persistence we still see today in parents and family members whose sacrificial, even absurd or desperate actions, show that they really would do almost anything for a glimmer of hope and freedom from pain for the one they love.

This particular healing is one which we too hear of in the Gospel of Matthew. However, in contrast to the multiple occasions when the sick, the poor, the needy, and even their friends or relatives come to Jesus, in search for transformation Jesus does not initially display his usual sense of warmth and expendable compassion. This more human account instead reflects perhaps a sense of impatience, perhaps Jesus was even suffering from compassion fatigue. Then there continues this famous seemingly strange conversation about children, crumbs and dogs, the meaning of which has been analyzed by theologians for years. And yet what scholar Brian Blount suggests about their interaction shows that she, the woman, *as well as* Jesus have a transformative encounter that precipitates a moment of joy and experience of wholeness. And too on this occasion both mother and daughter honored with a miracle. Barbara Brown Taylor describes this transformation in this way. 'You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he is called to do.'

From this scene Jesus then moves on to Decapolis, a network of ten cities, and continues to fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah 'That eyes will be opened, ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame shall leap, and the mute will shout for joy'.

As we turn to our second miracle today, we hear of a different type of healing, as someone also unnamed was called upon, as we too heard in our Collect today 'To trust God with all his heart' as he was physically brought by faithful friends motivated by their collective determination or even desperation to bring him to Jesus, into the Lord's presence. Friends who clearly ignored the norms and sensibilities of entering crowds, and who created their own sense of destruction along the way, just as another group of determined friends in scripture are recalled descending their friend through the roof, of all things, also desperate to meet Jesus, for healing. These people are taking desperate measures for desperate times.

In both of these encounters, and more, Jesus demonstrates a palpable compassion, power and presence and in this very instance takes the man aside and spends time with him alone. Jesus raises his head with a sigh to God, his father who made earth and sky and all that therein is. (Ps. 146). And the command Ephphatha, 'Be opened', accompanies a theandric action in which Jesus combines his humanity in the physical, tangible use of his very own spit, and as he too places his fingers in the deaf man's ears and upon his tongue the man's ears and mouth are indeed immediately opened and the transforming action of the divine is revealed. 'Be opened' with the same fingers of hands that had flung stars into space, and to cruel nails would be surrendered, brought open not only the joy of sound, as the man is transformed both physically, spiritually, emotionally and mentally.

A new light now shines in his man's soul as powerfully portrayed in Bartholomeus Breenbergh's painting of the Dutch Golden age 'Christ Healing of a deaf mute' portrayed in the context of a contemporary 16th century Italian landscape, in which Jesus and the man, now healed, are surrounded by a bright light to which others are drawn to discover their own transformation, not as something in the past but in their very own present context.

I wonder how much this man's life would have changed after this encounter. Certainly, his experience of Ephphatha, 'Be opened', opened up new and not just physical possibilities, including a door to being fully accepted and active in the community for the very first time.

I wonder: What would he have taken from this current chapter in his life into the next? A deep-rooted empathy for those experiencing prejudice, pity, exclusion. Perhaps he showed a greater understanding of those who struggled with their hearing, especially without the assistance of current technologies and communication tools, for as many of you know, hearing loss can bring such a sense of isolation and sheer exhaustion as one tries to participate in or access a conversation, desire to be listened to, understood, or even heard.

For many years scholars have reflected on this gospel on these simple words 'Be opened' to mean more than a physical healing. Martin Luther when preaching on this passage in 1533 emphasized the importance of opening our ears and loosening our tongues, for we must truly hear his word with our ears, confess it with our lips, and too, believe it in our hearts.

We are also reminded again and again in scripture, and as we hear in the Collect of Purity in our preparation for Mass, 'Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid.'

God knows our longings, the things that give us joy, or fill us with pain as well as desperation for ourselves, as well as for our brothers and sisters close by and those afar therefore: I wonder, to what and to whom might he be saying 'Be opened', today?