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Mark 7:24-37

EPHPHATHA

Ephphatha. It's a strange sounding word--almost a tongue twister. Ephphatha. Say it with me. Ephphatha. It's the Aramaic word meaning "be opened." It's what Jesus said to the deaf man when he healed him. The interesting thing is that the Gospel of Mark actually retains the Aramaic word here in this story. You see, Jesus would have spoken Aramaic. But the gospel stories would have all been written in Greek, which was the literary language of the day. And then that Greek text would eventually be translated into all the languages of the world, including English so we here today can read it. So when we read about the things Jesus did and said in the Bible, we are reading an English translation of a Greek text that was telling a story about Jesus who spoke Aramaic. But here today, here in our story today, the gospel writer of Mark felt it was important to use the Aramaic word itself, not a Greek word for "be opened." We aren't reading some translation of a translation. In this story, we get the words right from Jesus' mouth. Ephphatha is the word Jesus himself would have said when he healed the deaf man.

Mark's decision to use the original Aramaic word in this story highlights that there is something important about what takes place. This story is more than just a healing miracle. This story points to something more profound. And so it keeps that important word, Ephphatha, for emphasis. Something important has been opened here in our story and it isn't *just* the deaf man's ears.

If we want to understand what takes place in this story and the deeper meaning of Ephphatha, we have to take a look at the beginning of chapter 7 because what happens here later in chapter 7 is all connected to what happens at the beginning of chapter 7. At the very

beginning of this chapter in Mark, Jesus gets into a conflict with the religious leaders about food. Maybe you remember that the Jewish people followed very careful dietary rules about what they could eat and what they could not eat. Some foods were considered clean and some foods were considered unclean. The religious leaders don't like the way Jesus and his followers are a bit loose in following the dietary rules. Jesus argues that it isn't what goes into a person's mouth that makes them unclean but rather it is what comes *out* of a person's heart defiles: anger, envy, greed, pride, and other such qualities. And so contrary to the commonly held beliefs of his day, Jesus declares all foods clean.

And then as soon as this conversation is over, Jesus heads off to the land of the Gentiles. Our reading today tells us that Jesus set out to go to the region of Tyre--which was a predominately Gentile territory. Now, maybe you will also remember that Jews and Gentiles did not get along, did not mix together, eat together, socialize together. In fact, Jews considered Gentiles *unclean*. Unclean, just like some foods were considered unclean.

It is here in Tyre that Jesus has an encounter with a Gentile woman who begs Jesus to heal her sick daughter. This is the point where our story becomes most difficult to tell. We expect Jesus to show compassion, to act with tenderness, to demonstrate kindness. But that is not the Jesus we experience here in this story. Jesus tells this woman, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus' words make us wince. He called this woman a *dog*! He was telling her that his first priority was to bring God's message of love and redemption to the Jewish people and he called her a dog!

Now, a lot of scholars of this passage have tried to soften Jesus' words to make them more acceptable. Some have suggested that maybe Jesus was just testing the woman to find out the depth of her faith. Some have tried to rescue Jesus from sounding like a bozo by arguing that

the term he uses for dogs really translates as *puppies* and thus isn't as bad as it may seem. But the meaning of Jesus' words is clear. It was an insult. And his message was that she wasn't included in the inner circle of God's attention and care. Jesus was voicing a popularly held belief of his day that Gentiles were unclean outsiders.

But this Gentile woman won't give up. Her child's welfare is at stake. She won't be turned away. And so she counters Jesus' insult by stating that even the dogs deserve the crumbs that fall from the table. She argues that she and her child deserve even the remnants of God's attention and care. And this is where something astonishing happens. A major tectonic shift happens inside Jesus' heart and mind. He is impressed with her faith that she is also to be included in God's love and care. And this Jewish man is changed by the faith of this Gentile woman. And he heals her daughter.

And then we read that Jesus travels to Decapolis, another predominately Gentile area. And here, people bring to him yet another Gentile in need a healing: the deaf man. They beg Jesus to heal the man. Our reading tells us that Jesus looked up into heaven and sighed before he healed the man with the words, Ephphatha, be opened. Now what do you suppose lay beneath that sigh? Was it the sigh of deep understanding: "Yes, Lord, now I understand. It isn't enough just to heal one tenacious Gentile woman's daughter. You mean for me to include *every* Gentile in your circle of love." Was that what lay beneath his sigh? Or was his sigh a kind of chuckle: "I get it Lord. If all foods are clean, but so too are all people. The laugh is on me." Whatever that sigh meant, it signaled a major shift in Jesus as he came to understand that the scope of his ministry of preaching and teaching and sharing God's love was wider than he had imagined. When Jesus said to the deaf man, "Ephphtha" be opened, it was *his* heart and mind that were opened to the immense scope of God's love and grace.

Now, what are we to make of this imperfect Jesus, whose tone is harsh, who appears narrow-minded, who is somewhat reluctant with his compassion? What do we do with this portrait of a less than perfect Jesus? A less than perfect Jesus may unsettle some of us. But if we believe that Jesus was fully human as well as fully God, if we believe in his full humanity, might it not be reasonable to assume that Jesus would have held ideas that were endorsed by his society? What seems to be significant in this story, in part reinforced by the word Ephphatha, is that Jesus allowed God to open him, to unstop his heart and mind, and to open within Jesus a new understanding of God's love and inclusion.

Is it essential that we have a perfect Jesus, or is it essential that we have a Jesus who shows us mortals the way to God through his own example? Can you or I relate to a perfect Jesus, or can we relate to a Jesus who was shaped by his society as we are, sometimes in narrow ways of thinking as we are, but who grew and changed and let God move him in new directions?

Everything Jesus does in his lifetime was so that we might follow his lead. What happens to Jesus happens to us. Jesus is baptized so that we might be baptized as new creations, leaving behind an old life of darkness for the life God offers. Jesus healed and forgave people, so that we might learn to heal and forgive. Jesus died on the cross, so that we too might die to sin and fear and darkness. Jesus rose from the grave, so that we too might be raised to new life both now and in the life to come. And in our stories today, Jesus is opened to new insights so that we might be opened to the workings of God's spirit.

Thus, if Jesus can confront the barriers that existed in his heart and mind, then so can we. We don't have to be perfect. We just have to follow Jesus' lead in being opened to confronting the barriers we have allowed to form within ourselves.

There are still insiders and still outsiders today. There are still those considered clean and those considered unclean today. There are still those who sit at the table and those considered dogs beneath the table of privilege. Muslims, Jews, white, black, gay, transgendered, Republican or Democrat, Israeli, Palestinian, white collar, blue collar, undocumented migrant, our next door neighbors, our in-laws: there are always those who exist on the other side of the border, the fence, the aisle, the railroad tracks, the limitations of our hearts and minds.

Like the stone that was rolled away from the entrance to the tomb on that Easter morning, God shows us that God is in the business of opening what has been closed. What we learn today in our story is that the miracle of Ephphatha--the miracle of what God can open--took place well before Easter morning. The miracle is found in what God can open in the human heart and soul--for the stone in front of the tomb looks minor when compared to the obstacles that separate and divide us from one another, the deeply entrenched divisions between individuals, and communities, and nations. To roll back such obstacles is indeed a miracle. And as always, the one who first shows us this miracle, the one leading the way so we may follow, is Jesus.