

**September 6, 2016 Lectionary 23 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**Isaiah 35, Psalm 146**

**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**James 2:1-10, 14-17, Mark 7:24-37**

(Davidlose.net, 8-31-15, Star Tribune 9-4-15 page A1 and A7, ELCA and AME links)

**Grace and peace to you, beloved in Christ. Amen.**

**That woman—you, know, the Syrophoenician woman in our gospel—that woman wouldn't quit.**

She wouldn't back down, she wouldn't let up.

How could she? It was her daughter's life—her daughter's very life—she was begging for.

**News of refugees and migrants has been in our papers for months.**

Some 4 million have fled Syria alone in these five years of fighting.

And they're not just from Syria, but Iraq and Afghanistan, parts of northern Africa, too, pouring across the water, over the land, ideally to safety, to a better life, most often into Europe.

It's a humanitarian crisis—they say this is the largest displacement of people since World War II.

**This crisis became more real this week, as nations in turn refused or welcomed these guests.**

One image flashed around the globe and it haunts us: little Aylan Kurdi, just 2 or 3 years old, Velcro on his sneakers, a red t shirt, his blue shorts folded up at the waist to fit a little better 'round his small body.

They'd dressed him carefully, his mother and father had, at the start of a dangerous day.

And there he lay on the edge of the sea on a Turkish beach, still, lifeless.

His dad, Abdullah, wouldn't quit.

He wouldn't back down, he wouldn't let up.

They'd held onto the capsized boat, floating in the rough waves, trying to keep breath in their bodies.

When his wife and the two boys had slipped from his grasp and he'd made it ashore, he had searched the beach, then had run to the town, hoping, hoping to find them.

He wouldn't quit, he wouldn't back down. How could he?

**Everyone of the refugees fleeing the war torn lands**, praying for a safe future for their kids, everyone of them, has a story, this is just Abdullah's—it's his story, their story, of hope and loss and faith.

They couldn't back down, they couldn't let up, How could they?

**In this hyper connected global community**, in this broken age, I get desensitized.

My time is precious, just like yours, and those articles, they are big, complicated, just like the situations.

And so at my best, I glance at the headlines in this superficial kind of way, but I escape the stories, like Aylan's, like Abdullah's, until all at once I can't keep them back any longer, and I'm opened to their pain. I like to believe it's grace that opens me at those times, sin that keeps me closed, but grace that opens me.

**Our Gospel this morning from Mark is actually two stories, not just one.**

First the Syrophoenician mom cries to Jesus for her daughter, and Jesus refuses her with that enigmatic ethnic slur about giving the children's food to the dogs.

It's a brief interaction, the woman and her struggles held back at arms length.

Then comes the man who couldn't hear and consequently struggled to speak and be understood.

Ephphatha, Be Opened, Jesus commands, putting his fingers in the man's ears, taking his own saliva to touch the man's tongue. Be Opened, Jesus says, Be Opened.

It's intimate, uncomfortably intimate for many of us; it's direct, engaging, close up, honest.

**For years we've explained away** Jesus' response to the woman as a test of sorts, a test of her faith.

But that doesn't really work: there aren't any other tests like this in Mark...that's just not Jesus' MO

And, that's not the kind of God we believe in—we don't have a savior who tests us in our greatest need.

**So then what? What is going on in his story?**

I wonder if Jesus himself is being opened.

David Lose writes, "Perhaps, just perhaps, Jesus had not yet realized the full extent of God's mission or the radical nature of the kingdom he proclaimed."

Building on what David wrote, maybe Jesus is still learning, still being opened, still growing in faith, too?

This possibility that the woman and her need opened even Jesus, that it grows his faith, stretches his mercy—this may stretch us, and yet it fits our incarnational theology at the heart of Lutheran tradition.

**Maybe Jesus is being opened, too.**

Maybe Jesus can't really hear her cry— isn't really open—until the woman, that strong and desperate and faithful woman, calls him out, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

In a moment of utter humanity, Jesus opens himself to her, let's her in, and they are both forever changed.

Maybe Jesus is being opened, too.

**When I finally began** hearing the stories, looking at the photos, the anguish of Abdullah's grief, the small boy's body resting on the sandy beach, the lines of people, 1000s of people, many pushing over burdened strollers or carrying small children for hours, days, ...when I finally opened myself to this crisis, I wept, I sat at my kitchen table and wept, for these kids, for these parents, for these beloved of God and their loss and their hope. Finally, I was opened, opened to the situations and the politics and the emotions and the faith. Truth is, like most of us, in my privilege, I like to avoid the vulnerability of lives torn apart or pain that breaks us open...

...but then too often I miss Jesus, and I surely miss Jesus' people, and I may just miss faith itself. Thank God for grace that Opens us, like Jesus, grace that makes us human and faithful again, in our need, in our fear, in our vulnerability, in our power. It is grace that opens us.

**The African Methodist Episcopal Church AME**, the National Council of Churches, and denominations around the nation observe today Confession, Repentance, and Commitment to End Racism Sunday. Our ELCA Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, asked ELCA congregations to participate. In the invitation, AME Bishop Reginald Jackson wrote, "Racism will not end with the passage of legislation alone; it will also require a change of heart and thinking." He continued, "This is an effort which the faith community must lead, and be the conscience of the nation." In a very real way, these AME leaders invite us to Be Opened, to be laid bare by the ways our society's racism allows black and brown lives to be so often valued less than white lives.

**That Syrophenician woman wouldn't quit.** Abdullah wouldn't quit. The church can't quit. We can't back down, we can't let up. How could we? In the discomfort, in the tentative steps, in our uncertain voices, God's grace will meet us again. This is the stuff of resurrection—in our fear, God promises life, and a way.

**A pastor friend of mine told me this week about a man who stopped by the church.**

The fellow explained how he'd grown up in that church, but heroin and meth had become his focus. This week he's headed for treatment but he wanted to stop at church before he left. "I needed to be reminded of my baptism," he explained. Ephphatha, Be Opened, Jesus whispered that day so long ago. Be Opened, Jesus whispers still to us, Be Opened, like grace has opened me, so may it open you. Remember again the promises of life for you, and for our world. Be Opened. Amen.