

September 5, 2021 15th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 35:4-7a, Psalm 146
Mark 7:24-37

[Some ideas, a quote, and a Barbara Brown Taylor quote from Debie Thomas in this Journey with Jesus blog post on 9-2-18: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1907-be-opened>.

Quote from Smithsonian, September 2021, "After 9-11", p. 29.

Ideas from: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>.

Ideas from current Sermon Brainwave Podcast on Working Preacher, for 9-5-21.

Ideas from my own sermon from 9-9-18.]

Beloved, Grace and Peace, from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This Gospel story, the one we just heard, can be tricky.

First off, it's not exactly one story, but more like two, two miracle stories:

The story of Syrophenician Woman, fierce and strong, as she comes to advocate for her daughter.

Then the story of the man whose friends bring him to Jesus, for he is deaf and has trouble speaking.

But this reading didn't start as miracle stories, it started as respite, did you notice?

It started as a time away, a brief sabbatical, even.

I can only imagine that Jesus is weary, tired spiritually, physically, mentally.

Every time he tries to catch a break,

the crowds come looking, needing, begging, crying,

or the disciples need a hand.

In today's reading he has traveled quite a ways north into Gentile territory,

eager to escape sight,

wishing for no one to know he is there,

retreating to someone's home in search of privacy.

(Think public figure or actor or the like, big sunglasses and a magazine, stealth.)

That's where she finds him—in this time of much needed retreat

It's an awkward conversation, to say the least, you heard it.

This Gentile woman, most likely of the land-owning class,

speaking with Jesus, this Jewish man, a teacher, a healer.

She comes begging, desperate, persistent,

surely exhausted herself, a mom on a mission,

her child sick with a demon, out of control.

I hear this as a mental health crisis, as mental illness in a time when there weren't words or understanding.

Where else could she turn?

And Jesus' response, in her moment of crisis?

Well, it makes me cringe, and then it makes angry.

He compares the child, her child, her beloved child, to a dog.

It's ethnically offensive. It's derogatory. It's dismissive.

For generations preachers have tried to get Jesus off the hook, "save" Jesus, if you will, from himself,

Maybe he's just speaking as a man of his time, they say.

Maybe he's clear on his mission...and he thinks it's not to this woman or her child.

Maybe he's making this ethnic slur intentionally, trying to test her, even goad her.

Maybe, or maybe that's not really the point:

Maybe (and this is the way I'd go):

maybe Jesus himself is stretched,

and maybe he is convicted in that moment.

Maybe he is utterly offensive to begin, to be sure,

but this woman schools him: smart and sassy, direct and determined,

flipping around his slur, she says: even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

And in that moment of grace, Jesus is changed,

by her passion, by her fierce love, by her need,

Jesus is change.

By her clear vision that this table is big enough for her and her daughter and her people,

Jesus is changed, he grows,

Jesus is opened,

Jesus' ministry is re-defined.

You know: In a time like ours so full of complexity,

when race and power and gender are being deconstructed and reimagined,

when we're asking questions like "what is safety?",

when boundaries are shifting and biases are being tested,

I find tremendous Good News in today's story.

We have a Savior who teaches us how to listen closely,

how to be stretched,

how to grow.

The hesitance to acknowledge Jesus' hard, insensitive response for what it is,

is rooted in concern that if Jesus is human enough to make a mistake,
if he's real enough to grow and change,
then can he still be divine?

In Jesus Christ, fully God, fully human, we learn how to be human,
and in that, thank God, Jesus shows us how.

He's tired, yes, of course,

but he doesn't curl up in the corner or throw up his hands in embarrassment or disgust.

Rather he sticks with it: he is humbled, and opened, and still strong.

Jesus learns, Jesus grows, he changes.

That is a Godly witness and a human witness we need, right now, perhaps more than ever.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

"You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning
as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is
and what he has been called to do."

Church, Hope, in a story like this,

we can come to a new understanding of who we are,
and what we are called to do.

Praise God that this woman doesn't back down.

Thank God that Jesus is opened.

Dear friends, I'm feeling at the cross roads this morning, maybe you know these intersections.

There is so much afoot:

The complexity of Afghanistan and our response, attacks there and in New Zealand.

The devastation of hurricanes and floods, earthquakes and fires,
the complications and demands of climate change.

I'm thinking about the murders of George Floyd and Dante Wright and Leneal Lamont Frazier
and the vigils that communities still keep, daily, nightly, it's not over.

I'm feeling the debates about safety and law enforcement
and the wildly different perspectives people and communities hold,
and our path toward November's elections.

I'm thinking about Labor Day, and essential workers and their families, exhausted,
about living wages and the great resignation.

I'm mindful of 20th Anniversary of the 9-11 attacks.

I've been reading articles about those who died and those who lived, 20 years later, grieving still.

A now-43 year old daughter spoke of her mom,

Vivian Casalduc, who worked on the 28th floor of the North Tower.

She was a microfiche clerk for Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, her daughter says.

It was quite a tribute to her mother's way of living, gathering, nurturing, celebrating:

"Do what makes your blood pump," Her mom told her in the years before she died.

"Do what makes your blood pump.

You need to be passionate about what you do because life is short." Amen.

Friends, summer is turning to fall.

Students of all ages, teachers, staff and professors, are headed back to class.

After so many months of a quiet neighborhood, students are in Dinkytown,

towing trailers, lugging boxes,

reconnecting with friends and roommates,

cheering the Gophers,

anxious to get on with things and at once scared by Delta and what could still come.

As a congregation, next week some will venture back into the sanctuary,

the first time, really, since March of 2020—that's a long time.

I look forward to the choir, to your faces (masks and all), a sense of normalcy,

I don't even know what that means any more.

And, truth is, it'll feel different, very different, for COVID is still here and the care and caution changes us.

We as a worshipping community have been changed.

The role of the church—the big church—has been changed and will change even more.

Our world has been changed.

It'll take years to unpack all this, but at this crossroads, I wanted to name at least some of it today.

We've looked closely this morning at the story of Jesus with the Syrophenician Woman.

The other story that follows is another miracle:

when the friends bring to Jesus the man who is deaf and who can't speak.

Jesus finds a quiet place with the man, he looks up to heaven, he sighs, did you catch that?

Jesus sighs, and says, Ephphatha, Be opened.

Take a breath, dear friends in Christ, there is much to sigh about these days.

Take a breath, and let out a sigh.

Beloved, be opened.

I'm closing today borrowing the words of Debie Thomas.

"Be opened.

Be opened to the truth that God isn't done with you yet.

Be opened to the destabilizing wisdom of people who are nothing like you.

Be opened to the voice of God speaking from places you consider unholy.

Be opened to the widening of the table.

Be opened to Good News that stretches your capacity to love.

Be opened."

Amen.