**BE OPENED**

A lot of times, we as preachers preach just as much to ourselves as we preach to all of those who attend our services. And as someone who regularly preaches on God’s inclusive love, this text of Jesus’ rejection of the Syrophoenician woman really made me think about how quick I am at times to say “no” to people who I don’t think deserve my help.

A couple of years ago, we fixed the leaking roof of a client who applied to MATE’s Housing Ministry. The house was a mess – I always think I’ve seen it all, but I never cease to be surprised. It smelled of animal urine and feces, and you could barely pick your way through. The yard was no better, and we had to spend time cleaning it out in order to put the staging up. For that matter, they admitted that they just threw the trash out the windows. We finished the job - $2500 later - and two days later I received a call from the homeowner, accusing us of taking a spade from their yard. I returned to the home to see if I could spot it, because we didn’t have it, and instead found a new, huge above-the-ground pool put up in the cleaned-up yard. I realized instantaneously that I was mad (and that’s putting it lightly) that we did all this work, none of them interested in assisting, and then went to spend who-knows-how-much on a pool. I vowed there and then that we would not return…. If they could do that, they don’t need our help, do they?

This story in my life, and so many others, really hit me between the eyes when I read the gospel for today. It follows days of Jesus feeding the multitudes, healing the sick, liberating the demon-possessed, and confronting the Pharisees without respite — all while putting up with his perpetually clueless disciples. We don’t know for sure why Jesus goes off by himself, but we can assume that some combination of physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion has led him to seek solitude. Maybe close to burn-out… so Jesus takes a break – a retreat if you will…

Ready to put his feet up for a while, out in Gentile territory, where no one might now him, Jesus enters a house. But as soon as he does, a Gentile woman of Syrophoenician origin, the other who is unclean, an enemy of the Jews, seeks him out. And here is Jesus, snapping at her, calling her a dog – yes, that’s right - as she bows at his feet and begs for the life of her daughter. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” NOT MY JESUS! I might not be perfect, but Jesus is… I can lose my temper, be at wits end, be so tired that I cannot find anything in myself to give anymore, but definitely not Jesus.

I wonder if this makes us so uncomfortable, because it holds up a mirror towards us. When you sit at the light and find other things to look at, afraid to meet the eyes of the person with the “homeless” sign standing right next to you. When you holler some really obscure stuff at the person cutting in front of you when you are driving. I wonder if some of our sayings, like “they have to pull them up by their own bootstraps”, or “God helps those who helps themselves”, might have a similar ring to it in today’s society for those on the fringes. I wonder about our diminishing others, ignoring their suffering as that of their own making falls into this category…

The Jesus I grew up with was perfect. He had to be, because the theology we constructed around his deity requires it. Almost as if his incarnation fell several steps short of actual humanness. This Jesus never messed up, never fell short, never said a harsh word, ignored anyone or ever had to say he was sorry. He always had perfect reasons for saying the things he said and doing the things he did. So, this doesn’t Jesus, throwing around uncompassionate, ethnic slurs common to his time, does not fit here. He must have had a really good reason for doing so.

So, we find ways around it – explaining it away. Maybe Jesus is bone tired, and wants, just for once, to take care of himself before taking care of anyone else. I bet he is tired of helping thankless people, always expecting something from him, but doing very little in return. Maybe it is just a test to prove the woman’s devotion. Some even say he was teasing, had a twinkle in his eye, as he called her a “puppy”. It might sound too much like heresy to even imagine that even Jesus could act in human ways.

But the Syrophoenician woman – the ethnic, religious and gendered other - schools Jesus in his own gospel. She deconstructs his bias and entitlement, breaks the barrier of his prejudice and teaches him compassion. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” It cuts to the very heart of Jesus’s boundary-breaking, division-destroying ministry of table fellowship. After all, he’s the Messiah who eats with tax collectors and prostitutes. He breaks bread with sinners. His disciples are the ones who earn the Pharisees’ contempt for eating with unwashed hands.

This woman believes there is enough for everyone, even if it is only crumbs. That’s how abundant God’s kingdom and God’s mercy are. She persisted, and it was rewarded. She forces Jesus to reconsider his stance and he does. Jesus *changes.* He allows himself to be humbled, rearranged, and remade. Jesus can only agree that God’s love and healing power know no ethnic, political, or social boundaries. “For saying that,” Jesus responds, “you may go — the demon has left your daughter.”

Jesus is not *half*-incarnate. He is as just as fully human as he is fully God. Jesus is a product of his time and place, shaped just as us by biases, prejudices and entitlements of his culture. Jesus, just like us, struggles, snaps, grows tired, falters, learns, and grows. He’s real, he’s approachable, and authentically one of us. And this is actually good news… we don’t serve an inaccessible deity, far removed from understanding what we go through. This Jesus shows us what it looks like to grow as a child of God. This Jesus teaches us what it looks like to realize our mistakes, to stretch and grow into deeper and fuller understanding and living of God’s love. Even he needed to “be opened” to how radically good that good news is.

Where are the places we need to expand? What are the biases and prejudices we need to be schooled in? Where in our lives are we willing to be told differently about something we believe, and be humble enough to accept it?

This exchange is followed by another healing story – even deeper in Gentile territory. A deaf man is brought to Jesus. Jesus puts his fingers in the man’s ears, looks toward heaven, sighs, and says “Ephphatha”, which means *be opened*. Immediately the man is healed – his ears are opened, and his tongue loosened, and he hears and speaks. And the crowd goes wild, talking about how Jesus did everything perfectly. And although he tells them to stop, to not tell anyone, once you are opened – once you experience the never-ending, always feeding, compassionate and healing love of God, you cannot be quiet.

In the story of Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman, it is Jesus *himself*who has to have his eyes opened and his ears unstopped. Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, fully human, must face his own blind spots, rudeness, his own prejudice, and allow himself to “be opened” to the full, glorious, and uncomfortable implications of the gospel. Jesus who has to learn that his mission is larger than just his own group – those who are similar to him in faith and ethnicity. Jesus who has to expand his ministry to include every single person created in God’s own image, regardless of the labels and boxes that our own culture teaches us. Could it be that this unnamed Gentile woman has just opened Jesus—opened him to truly understand the ever-expanding mission God has given him?

And if Jesus can be opened, I think we can too. If Jesus was willing to, in all humility, hear this woman’s truth, and be willing to open and grow, so much so that he goes even deeper into Gentile territory to continue his ministry, we should be willing to follow that example. Because, just like Jesus, we are also called to grow and expand, to sometimes acknowledge that hard truth that we are not always in the know and in the right. We are also called to expand our mission to value those who teaches us from the outside in and makes it uncomfortable.

I had to learn, and am still learning, in so many ways to continue to love more, include more. The client who I talked about in the beginning – her spouse died a couple of days before we started by suicide. I was humbled, and deeply regretted my bitter thoughts – I still do. And if we are honest with ourselves, we all have places like that in our lives.

What would it be like to follow in the footsteps of a Jesus who listens to the urgent challenge of the Other? Who humbles himself long enough to learn what only a vulnerable outsider can teach? What would it be like to stop limiting who we will be for other people, and who we will let them be for us? What would it be like to insist on good news for people who don't look, speak, behave, or worship like we do? What would it be like to open wide the doors of the house across the driveway to anyone, absolutely anyone who is in need?

*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.