

“Be Opened!”

During one of the summers, while I was a student at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, I was a Chaplain Intern in the Clinical Pastoral Education Program of Deaconess Hospital. Clinical Pastoral Education Units are intensive training experiences, which help the participants to grow in their pastoral experience, in their understanding of the psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs of others, in their interpersonal skills, in their own spirituality, and in their own emotional and psychological wellness. At the conclusion of that CPE Unit, each of the participants, as part of their final evaluation were to create a clay – play-doh like sculpture symbolizing how they saw themselves changed by the CPE experience. **My creation was that of an open cave, which symbolized becoming more open to others and opening myself to others.** I mention that experience because today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading reminded me of it.

In Mark 7:32-35, the gospel states, “Some people brought him a man who was deaf and could hardly speak, and they begged Jesus to place his hands on him. So Jesus took him off alone, away from the crowd, put his fingers in the man’s ears, spat, and touched the man’s tongue. Then Jesus looked up to heaven, gave a deep groan, and said to the man, [‘Ephphatha,’] which means, ‘Open up!’ At once the man was able to hear, his speech impediment was removed, and he began to talk without any trouble.”

Mark’s description of the second story in the Reading reveals how Jesus healed the deaf man – enabled him to hear and, also, to speak clearly. **That miracle indicates the remarkable process and effort Jesus went through to Open Up the man!** It is rare when one of the four New Testament Gospels provides such detail about one of Jesus’ healings. It is especially unusual for Jesus to be reported exerting such physical and emotional energy. The inclusion of the actual word Jesus spoke, instead of merely reporting what he said along with the rest of the gospel in Greek, strongly emphasized both the authenticity of the saying and the importance of Jesus’ command for the man to be Opened Up.

Hopefully, it is easy to recognize Jesus’ focus on Opening Up the deaf man but one may wonder how Opening Up is connected to the first story in our Scripture. **To demonstrate Jesus was focused on bringing about an Opening Up of someone in the first story, requires the sharing of much more background information.** Kate Matthews [Huey] in the UCC Bible Study Resource “Weekly Seeds” is helpful in providing some of that needed knowledge. She wrote, “Many readers, including scholars, seem to miss something very interesting about this reading from the Gospel of Mark. They may recognize that the healing of the Syrophenician woman’s little girl and of the man who couldn’t hear or speak are miracles worked in Gentile territory, and they may even connect these miracles to the preceding passage, verses 1-23. But they don’t mention the progression from the story of Jesus feeding the crowd in the sixth chapter, along with healing and miracle stories among the Jews (including the daughter of the leader of the synagogue), through his teaching about what is ‘clean’ or ‘unclean’ (and the importance of the heart in such matters), to his acting on this teaching, described in today’s reading by the healings of two Gentiles, and finally, in Chapter 8, another feeding story, this time ‘on the other side,’ where the crowd is presumably made up of Gentiles.”

Kate noted, **“Because we read the Bible in short, ‘bite-size’ passages, we can miss the arc of a given section of narrative, and we often miss an important point in the larger story.”** (Weekly Seeds, September 6, 2015, reflection, “Be Opened” by Kate Matthews [Huey])

Kate Matthews [Huey] points to Jesus Opening Up his public ministry and including non-Jews among his followers through the two stories in today’s Scripture. However, I suggest Jesus went even further through those two stories – events. Specifically, Jesus’ encounter with the woman with the sick daughter was also intended by him to dramatically Open Up someone else. On the face of it, many interpret what took place was the changing of Jesus’ mind. They say Jesus was mistreating the non-Jewish woman out of typical Jewish prejudice toward Gentile pagans. Unfortunately, the Gospel of Mark’s account was too terse and too limited in its sensitivity to what was occurring in Jesus’ discussion with the woman, so it is difficult for us to fully perceive from it what Jesus did through that event. **As Kate indicated, Jesus was intentionally moving toward revealing Gentiles – non-Jews were also invited to be his followers or disciples, as he was engaged in his experience with the woman, so it is doubtful he would have been intent on rejecting her.** Let me demonstrate how Jesus was actually doing this Opening Up of the company of his followers – forcing the new truth upon his original disciples.

Unfortunately, Mark's terse and brief version of the exchange between Jesus and the woman seems to provide a troubling view of his acceptance of the prejudices of the Jewish society of that time toward non-Jews, especially pagan women. In the parallel account of the Gospel of Matthew, much more detail was given about the event. **Using Matthew's version, Matthew 15:21-27, as a basis, I will now provide a different view of what took place between Jesus, his disciples, and the woman with the sick daughter.**

Matthew wrote, *"Jesus left that place and went off to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman who lived in that region came to him. 'Son of David!' she cried out. 'Have mercy on me, sir! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition.' But Jesus did not say a word to her. His disciples came to him and begged him, 'Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise!'"* Please note, the woman's pleas are bothering Jesus' disciples and not him! Since Jesus had not spoken to the woman and his disciples had just complained to him, his response was to his disciples. **Matthew continues, "Then Jesus replied, 'I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel.[?]"** I believe Matthew or his source either did not know Jesus answered his disciples with that challenging question or they knew it was a question but did not indicate it as being so. That is why you see I inserted the question mark in brackets. I also hope the woman and Jesus were trading glances or looks, through which the woman was aware of Jesus' annoyance with his disciples and their failure to be supportive of his greater openness toward all people. The woman was clearly paying close attention to what Jesus and his disciples were saying to each other. **Matthew continued, "At this the woman came and fell at his feet. 'Help me, sir!' she said."** Since the woman was very attentive to what Jesus said, did, his tone of voice, and his facial expressions, she knew he was trying to persuade his disciples to think differently – to be Opened Up to non-Jews. **So I believe, mocking his disciples, "Jesus answered, 'It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'" I picture he looked directly at his disciples as he said that and then he turned, perhaps smiling, toward the woman. Matthew continued, "That's true, sir,' she answered, 'but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters' table.'" The woman picked up on what Jesus was doing and used the prejudicial statement he had thrown back to his disciples as the basis of her response. "So Jesus answered her, 'You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you.' And at that very moment her daughter was healed."** The woman had Opened Up – trusted Jesus, followed his lead, and demonstrated her faith in front of the original disciples. Unfortunately, it would take much longer for the disciples to fully comprehend how Jesus wanted them to be Opened Up – welcoming of all people – Jews and Gentiles – non-Jews, women and men, Judeans and foreigners, and those obedient to the Jewish laws and so called "sinners".

In line with the Opening Up Jesus was seeking to foster among his original disciples through his encounter with the foreign, non-Jewish woman, he also did that extraordinary Opening Up of the deaf man! Continuing to move the process of Opening Up his ministry to all people and not just the Jews, his miracle of healing the deaf man Opened Up the crowd of pagan non-Jews, who witnessed the healing, and recognized his special nature. **Mark concluded in verse 37, "And all who heard were completely amazed. 'How well he does everything!' they exclaimed. 'He even causes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak!'"**

Clearly, Jesus calls his followers – all his disciples to be Opened Up to his New Way of Welcoming Everyone with Radical Hospitality! He wants us to know the New Life in Christ and the New Relationship with God, which we have received because of Jesus, is offered to all people! **He calls us to be Opened Up – to see all people as being loved and forgiven by God.** Unfortunately, society's understanding of Christianity is the opposite – it says we are judging and excluding, especially persons, who are different from one's self. Also, it is unfortunate, but a large segment of those, who think of themselves as Christians, do not hear the call to be Opened Up to all people and have, instead, been tempted to respond to some of the "others" as unclean sinners and enemies of God. **Let us, instead, respond positively to Jesus' openness, expressions of agape love for us, and his call for us to be Opened Up! Amen.**