

Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
First Congregational UCC, Appleton
September 8, 2024
Mark 7:24-37: *Be Opened*

The Christmas before last, covid finally got to me. In the grand scheme of things, my case wasn't terrible, but it wasn't pleasant. Benign but weird things happen with my heart, my mental health tanked, and I experienced intense fatigue for weeks. But the symptom that really threw me for a loop set in nearly four weeks after I tested positive. I woke up one morning unable to hear from my right ear. I assumed there must be fluid in my ear, or maybe even a painless infection. After a few days I texted my friend and parishioner Bob, who was conveniently also an ear specialist. I thought I was just being melodramatic. I was not. He made arrangements to meet me in his office even though it was closed for Martin Luther King Day. There was no fluid, no wax. The virus had likely camped out behind my eardrum, causing sudden hearing loss.

Bob was calm as he explained that I needed to go to the pharmacy and start a high dose of steroids immediately, because there is only a short window of time during which sudden hearing loss can be reversed. After a week or so, the loss would be permanent. I appeared calm on the outside but was frantic. I filled the prescription, downed the first six pills in the parking lot, and spent the evening at church meetings trying to appear calm on the outside despite my still-frantic state.

In the morning, I could hear. I reported back to Bob's office for a hearing test. It showed only mild hearing loss.

At the time, I'd been listening to the audiobook recording of the *First Nations Version of the New Testament*. As I was driving away from the audiology appointment my bluetooth connected and the story picked up where it had left off, right before the story of Jesus healing the deaf man in the gospel of Mark. I heard the words blessedly loud and clear:

"The people who lived there brought a man who could not hear or speak right. They begged Creator Sets Free, Jesus, to lay his hands on him. So, he took the man away from the crowd..." I listened through tears of shock and relief. I felt the staggering smolder of

God's mysterious, irrational, unprovable providence. I thanked God for Bob. I thanked God for prednisone.

I thanked God for that word, that miracle: *ephphatha*. That is, be opened.

It can be a crisis, when something is stuck shut. An emergency exit blocked by boxes, or a mind closed by ideology. A terrifying crisis.

Today's scripture reading depicts not one but two instances of stuck things being opened by the grace of God.

The story of the Syrophenician woman's faith might end with a healing, but it begins with an insult. Jesus understood that he had a ministry to do. He understood that he was called to teach, heal, and redeem God's people.

But he did not yet comprehend that God's people extended beyond the Israelite tribe - certainly not to the idolatrous and toxic Gentile neighbors who only ever made life hard for his kinsmen.

The exchange between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is painful but extraordinary. The woman was trusting and faithful, approaching Jesus in absolute trust that this holy man had the capacity to heal her tormented daughter. Yet he refused. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

There is no pretending that these words were anything but an insult. In Hebrew culture, dogs were not looked upon favorably. Jesus was not referring to a beloved poodle when he conjured the image of dogs begging under the dinner table.

[Can we just pause to acknowledge a momentous occasion: now both of your co-pastors have mentioned poodles in this pulpit!]

Dogs were rarely kept as pets or trained as workers. They were scavengers, nuisances running wild.

Despite this affront to her dignity, the Syrophenician woman was polite but persistent. "Sir, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She may as well have said *Ephphatha* - be opened. Because the next thing that happened was every bit as astonishing as the miracle that preceded it: Jesus' heart and mind were

opened to the will of God. He changed his answer. He healed the woman's daughter. *Ephphatha*, indeed.

These stories are rich with meaning and importance for all sorts of reasons, but today, as we celebrate Rally Sunday, I can't help but read them as an icon for what it means to be First Congregational United Church of Christ, the church of the open door.

First, both within and beyond the walls of this church, we are surrounded by people in need of healing. People are in so much pain. So many of the afflictions are invisible, so many of the shackles are unseen. People are lonely, hopeless, anxious, traumatized, cynical. The news cycle is relentlessly bleak, every day more headlines about intractable wars and mass shootings. In the midst of this, you can choose apathy. Or you can lean into community. Not just any community. A community of compassion, resistance, hope. A community that recognizes the transformative power of Jesus Christ.

And just as the woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter and the friends of the deaf man begged Jesus to lay hands on him, week after week we beg for mercy and restoration. Only we don't call it begging. We call it praying. The opposite of apathy is intercession, the opposite of despair is praise, the opposite of cynicism is having the courage to wrestle a blessing from the very Son of God.

Whatever else we are called to do as a congregation - and, no joke, when you read that Activity Guide you will see that we are called to a lot - it all flows out of that first critical identity: we must be people who pray. So I pray that we are a congregation of people who turn to Jesus without pride or restraint. I pray that we are a congregation of people who refuse to surrender to apathy but who are instead compelled by the goodness of God.

Second, the story of the Syrophenician woman is emblematic of our identity as the church of the open door. She could be our patron saint. Her faith cut through centuries of animosity. Her trust dismantled Jesus's understanding of his ministry and

reconstructed it without limits. Jesus was not meant to love, teach, and heal only the people in his own culture, the people already bound in covenant to his own God.

Rather, God sent Jesus into the world for the whole world— to bring the Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven to all people, everywhere—even the ones he had been brought up to mistrust. The door was opened, through the protest and perseverance of a woman and by the grace of God.

We're all well aware that many Christian traditions try to close that door back up again. It will never work; grace will always find a way to break in. But oh, how the world needs a church with an open door, a church with an open table, a church with an open heart. A church that is willing to listen, to wrestle, to be uncomfortable. A church that wholeheartedly welcomes people in, and courageously follows Jesus out.

Ephphatha. Be opened. May it be so.