

Be Opened!

Preached on The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
August 22, 2021
Text: Mk. 7: 31-37

The Gospel for today comes at the very end of 7th Chapter of Mark. This chapter 7 and Chapter 15 of Matthew have many parallels. Only a few months back, on the second Sunday in Lent we read a portion of Matthew 15. It concerned the pleading of a Syro-Phoenician woman that Jesus free her daughter from demon possession. You probably recall that his response to her was less than encouraging: “it isn’t right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” But she was not dissuaded; she humbly accepted her status while still displaying great faith. Jesus marveled at this and healed her daughter instantly. The same event is recorded in the chapter from which our reading is taken this morning.

The chapter opens with the arrival from Jerusalem of an official delegation of Pharisees and Scribes who have come to make an assessment of Jesus and his movement. Putting it this way, however, makes it sound as if they were conducting a good-faith inquiry. Not so. They already hated him and were looking for ways to discredit him. After joining up with local Pharisees, they confront Jesus with the fact that his disciples were not performing the proper ablutions for purification prior to eating. Good Jews, at least good Pharisees, were expected to wash with a handful of water before and after eating a meal. This was not so much aimed at hygiene as we understand it. It was a man-made law designed to indicate one’s right standing as a Jew; it was not a Law of Moses.

Jesus and his disciples could well have started ignoring this tradition after the marriage feast in Cana. For when Jesus turned the water into wine, this made ritual purification impossible at that event. Afterward, his disciples probably took it up as a mark of discipleship not to perform this Pharisaical ritual. So the Pharisees now had some ammunition: “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?” (Mk. 7: 5) The response of Jesus was quite severe.

“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men.’ You leave the commandments of God, and hold fast to the traditions of men.” (7 :6-8)

According to Jesus, the Pharisees, were avoiding the true holiness God’s commandments were meant to bring about by focusing all their attention on ceremonial observances. Through their traditions they were making the word of God “void.”

One gets the impression from the text that he literally turned and walked away from them. He called his followers together to teach them what the argument was all about. At this point, things were about to change in a sweeping and deep-seated way that no one but Jesus could have imagined. For he told the crowd that “there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him.” (v. 15)

It is tempting for many to soften this statement of Jesus by arguing that the washing issue is not an argument over the Law of Moses, but rather it is an argument over the “traditions” of the Pharisees that were added to the Law of Moses. Others say that the Pharisees were applying the specific requirements of priests to the Jewish laity, which is probably true. It was part of the priest’s preparation in making a blood sacrifice to perform these washings. There are other explanations of what Jesus said and did on this occasion; but these speculations distract from the lesson Mark takes from all this, and which is highly significant: “Thus he declared all foods clean.”

Though *we* might not pause over this, in the 1st century this was revolutionary! For Jews, not only were all foods *not* clean, neither were all people. So Jesus was not simply clearing up Israel’s muddled thinking on the Law of Moses. It was not that all this time they had misunderstood Moses. Nor was he saying that there was an inner meaning of the Law of Moses they had missed. No. This is what Jesus did: at that moment, in that place, he actually changed the Law by his pronouncement!

Now the food laws in Leviticus were central to the whole concept of purity and holiness for Jewish culture and Jewish identity. Along with circumcision and keeping the Sabbath, the dietary laws were a public mark of Jewish holiness. They were a peculiar people set apart for God and made holy. The dietary laws were an outward and visible sign of this. Among other things, the Law also made it impossible for Jews to share in meals prepared by non-Jews. It was a wall that divided the Jews from the rest of the world, and you can see in Acts that it took a long time for the Church in Jerusalem to accept Jesus’s teaching on this matter. For he was initiating a titanic shift in Jewish thinking. It was a first and mighty blow against the wall that stood between the Jews and the Gentiles. And if anybody got this, it was St Paul—and he suffered much opposition because of it.

It should come as no surprise then that right after that pronouncement Jesus leaves for the region of Tyre and Sidon — Gentile cities. When he arrived he entered the home of a resident. What is the Jewish Messiah doing entering the unclean dwelling of a Gentile? Furthermore, he encounters the Syro-Phoenician woman we referred to earlier and freed her child from the demon. He then circles back around to the Decapolis—again, a Gentile area. This is the context of the Gospel for today.

Some people bring a deaf man with a speech impediment to Jesus and beg him to heal the man. Now it is worth asking why these Gentiles would have approached him at all. They were probably not aware of Hebrew prophesy, nor would it have made much sense if you had laid it out for them. The whole idea of the “Kingdom of God” or the

Messianic hope were foreign concepts. There would have been no cultural reference point within which to place Jesus's ministry. Nevertheless, they appear to have had some faith that Jesus might heal their friend. His reputation had obviously preceded him. He healed the man, enabling him to hear and to speak clearly. The people's response to this healing was overwhelming. They were "astonished beyond measure," according to the text. The miracle filled them with wonder and they responded almost like a chorus ending a story: "He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak." (v. 37b)

St. Mark quite likely wants the reader to draw a parallel between the miracle just performed and the mighty work that only God Almighty can do. In Isaiah 35 we read, "Behold, your God...will come and save you. The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped...and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy!" (4b-5; 6b) So we have three big events in this chapter. First, Jesus declared a fundamental portion of the Law of Moses to be null and void when he declared that all food was clean. Second, this action on his part enlarged the horizon of the Messiah's ministry to include all those non-Jews who had been excluded on the basis of the dietary laws. And third, he wraps it all up by performing a miracle that identifies him not only as the Messiah, but as God Almighty

It is not surprising that from early in church history, Christians have seen this story as capturing quite well what Jesus does for us through his Spirit. He says *Ephphatha*—be opened—while we are still spiritually deaf and cannot hear his voice. Likewise, until he releases our tongue, we cannot worship in spirit and in truth. We acknowledge this in both Morning and Evening Prayer when we say: "O Lord, open thou our lips. And our mouth shall show forth thy praise." St. Ambrose tells us that a common liturgical custom in the late fourth century was to announce *Ephphatha* before the homily given by the priest or bishop. This word served as a prayer that God would make the congregation receptive to his word. For without the gracious work of the Spirit, we cannot hear Christ.

Whenever the sacraments are duly administered and the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, we know it is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is Jesus himself through his Spirit touching our ears, and tongues, and hearts. And it is only because of his breaking down the barrier between Jew and Gentile that we have been adopted as his children. The Levitical code was the line Israel drew around itself to distinguish itself from the Gentiles. Now that line has been drawn around all who trust in Jesus, both Jew and Gentile. As St. Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3: 28)

In the Name...