

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 23
September 6, 2009

Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm 146
James 2:1-17
Mark 7:24-37

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

The Oscar winning actress, Sally Field, once starred in a movie entitled; “Not Without My Daughter”. It was the real life story of a woman named Betty Mahmoody. She was an American woman who went to the Middle East with her daughter and native-born husband.

It was intended to be just a vacation where her husband visits his family living in the then, unsettled political climate of Iran. But Betty discovers that her husband never intended to bring his family back to America. Now, she becomes a stranger in a foreign land forced to live in a society where women are subservient, abused, and oppressed.

Her husband and the government tell her that she may return to the United States if she wanted to. However, her daughter must stay behind. Without hesitation, Betty decides that she will not leave without her daughter even if it means her death. She then begins her quest to break down cultural barriers and face humiliation in order to get her child back home safely.

In our Gospel story this morning we hear of another woman seeking to get her daughter back. In this case the mother is on a quest to free her daughter from the possession of an unclean spirit. She is a stranger in a foreign land seeking help from a man named Jesus whom she had heard can do miraculous things.

While Jesus sought rest from his labors, this woman sought rest from her troubles. She is a tired, frustrated parent desperately in need of some help.

First, we learn that this woman is willing to go some extra distance to save her child. Mark tells us that she is a Syrophenician, a Greek. She was from Tyre, a small island off the coast of Sidon. The author of Matthew's Gospel calls her a Canaanite, a descendant of Canaan.

But what is important is the fact that both writers are trying to point out that culturally, racially, and socially, she is different – she is an alien – an outsider.

Today, in our country, she may be the single mom with a dead beat ex-husband who is not paying his child support. She is probably on some form of government aid – perhaps food stamps or welfare.

She is black, Hispanic, or perhaps a person of another color that is not of European descent. She most likely does not have any health care insurance for her or her child. She is probably uneducated and unchurched.

To the Jews, the Syrophenician woman was regarded as a pagan, a heathen. And this woman knew of the long-standing hatred between her people and the Jews. But prejudice and racism did not hinder her from seeking help from her enemies. For when your house is burning, you don't care who helps you put out the fire.

Even so, she knew that when she came into the presence of Jesus, the saints would roll their eyes and talk about her.

I would say most of us have been there before. When we go to the PTA meeting, and people say under their breath; "It was her daughter that got in trouble the other day". Or at the sporting event, the murmuring in the background that says; "If it wasn't for his son, we would have won the game last week."

Or perhaps it more serious. “Did you hear that his son got arrested last night for stealing, or; her daughter is pregnant, and they don’t even know who the father is.” Most of us can relate to this woman who came to Jesus in desperation. We have seen the stares and heard the backhanded comments.

You see, this woman in today’s Gospel story had a problem going on in her home. Her child was out of control. She was experiencing a crisis. And obviously, for her to seek help outside of her culture, race and possibly her religion shows how desperate she was.

So where is it that we go in times like this? Hopefully we turn to Jesus. For Jesus is known for welcoming the stranger – loving the outsider. Jesus is not concerned about your background – your race, your culture, or your citizenship. Or as we might say today; whether or not you are in a particular country illegally or not.

For Jesus only sees a child of God that is in need of help, and responds with love and compassion.

So how does Jesus do this today you might ask? It is through the visible expression of Jesus on earth – the Church. For it is within the Church that you will experience hope and salvation.

You see, Jesus is present in and amongst the body of believers, which is the Church. This is the vehicle in which Jesus continues to be present in the world. It is through you and me – through Word and Sacrament.

Now the woman in our story realized that in order to save her child, she had to re-arrange her schedule, re-organize her priorities. Whether she wanted to or not, she had to take off a day from work to seek out Jesus. She had to go some extra distance to get some help from God.

But that was her last hope. She had no one else to turn to. And Jesus was there for her. Jesus saw her faith and healed her daughter.

Jesus then left that area and went toward the Sea of Galilee where some people brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech. They begged Jesus to lay his hand on him. Again, Jesus became their only hope to heal their friend. So Jesus took the man aside in private. He put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.

Then looking up to heaven he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

There is the story of a man named Carl who had reached the depths of despair. At one time, he had a loving family, a successful business and was well respected in the community. But then it all came crashing down on him. His wife left him, and his business failed.

Everything seemed to be going wrong and he didn't know where to turn. Finally, he remembered that his mother had told him to pray when everything else had failed.

So in the midst of his desperation, Carl tried to pray, but realized that he didn't know how. Finally, he said, “Jesus, this is Carl.” Not knowing what else to pray he repeated it again: “Jesus, this is Carl.” After a long period of silence, the words came pouring out from his heart again: “Jesus, this is Carl.”

That very night, Carl was in a terrible car accident. He said; “As I was lying in bed in the hospital not knowing if I would live or die, I became aware of a voice saying; ‘Carl, this is Jesus.’ In a few moments, I heard it again; ‘Carl, this is Jesus.’ And then the words came to me a third time; ‘Carl, this is Jesus.’”

And suddenly I felt a great burden roll off of my back. I felt so light and so free. I knew that everything was going to be all right.”

Everything was going to be all right, in the sense that Jesus was now a part of Carl's life. He might not get his wife back. His business might not ever recover. But he had far more than that. He had Jesus. And Jesus had said to him; "Ephphatha," "BE OPENED."

What about you and me? Does this kind of thing ever happen to us? While we may be able to talk and hear and understand just fine, perhaps we still suffer silently. In many ways we too are imprisoned and cry out to Jesus to come to us and say; "Ephphatha," "BE OPENED".

Perhaps you feel trapped by a sin you have committed in the past – something that you did that you wish with all of your heart that you could take back. You would give anything in the world to change what you did. But you can't change it, and it still haunts you. The guilt and the shame you carry around feels like an inescapable trap.

You wish that you could open up and tell someone, but you can't. The risks are too great. You have been told that you are forgiven, but the trap of guilt just won't let you go. You wonder if you will ever get out. To you, Jesus says; "Ephphatha," "BE OPENED."

Or maybe it's something that is ongoing. This is your own private little sin. No one knows about it except you. You've tried to stop doing it, but you can't. When you come to worship, you sometimes feel bad about it and you vow to change. But it is always right there, tugging at your sleeve.

No matter how hard you try, this habitual sin always ends up pulling you back down. You can't break away. Every time you try, the door to your private prison slams shut in your face. You wonder if you'll ever get out. To you, Jesus says; "Ephphatha," "BE OPENED."

Or maybe you suffer from a sin that isn't yours. You didn't do anything to deserve what happened to you. You know that it wasn't your fault that it happened. Someone chose to inflict this pain upon you. You were only a victim of their darkness.

But it doesn't matter because you still suffer from it. What that other person did stays with you. And you feel like you are pinned down by it. It won't let you go. You wonder if you'll ever be set free. To you, Jesus says; "Ephphatha," "BE OPENED."

We all have our own prisons. We all need to "BE OPENED." However, "being opened" can mean different things for different people.

James Bjorge in his book "Girded With Truth" told the following story: "In a little town in the mountains of France there is a shrine famous for its miracles of healing. One day shortly after WWII, an amputee veteran appeared at the shrine.

As he hobbled painfully along the way, someone remarked; 'That silly man! Does he really think that God will give him his leg back?'

The young veteran overheard the remarks and said, 'Of course I do not expect God to give me back my leg. I am going to pray to God to help me to live without it.'

This man was looking to "BE OPENED". He was looking to be set free – to live out his life fully even though his body was no longer complete.

Earlier I talked about the woman who was a stranger – an outcast looking for Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus also OPENED her life. No longer did she feel shunned because of her nationality, her religion, her situation in life she found herself in. For Jesus said; "You are important to me. You are a child created in the image of God, no matter what other people may say or think."

But how can this Jesus OPEN our lives we might ask? He is not here with us as he was with the people in the story we heard today. We can't have a discussion with him to convince him that he needs to heal someone close to us. He can't stick his fingers in our ears. He can't touch our tongues.

For it was not long after that, that his ministry was closed down. He was crucified. His earthly life was brutally ended. The light of the world was snuffed out.

But you see, it was the only way for heaven to BE OPENED for us. Through his sacrifice on the cross, the doors of heaven that were locked have been slung WIDE OPEN! Jesus uses his body and his bodily fluids again to perform an OPENING.

It's not fingers and spit this time. It is indeed his body and blood we see when we look to the cross on the Friday we call Good. And it is through the very same Body and Blood offered here today as we eat the bread and drink the wine.

And then, three days later we see the grandest OPENING of them all. The stone is rolled away! The tomb is empty. Christ is alive again!

And he promises that our graves will look just like that on the last day. WIDE OPEN! Empty, because when Jesus OPENS the doors that imprisons you, he sets you free. He frees you from death itself!

Therefore, for all of you here today that feel like a stranger – an outcast. For all of you who feel trapped by the burden of guilt and shame from past sins. For all of you who are currently in the bondage of a habitual sin. For all of you who are bearing the scars of the sins of others. Look what Jesus has done for you and for me!

His life, his death, and his resurrection has set us free. Free to be who God has intended us to be. Free to proclaim that God's kingdom is here. Free to live out our faith in love for God and to our neighbor. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.