

“Be Opened”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, The Church of the Covenant

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I remember growing up and seeing my grandfather’s hands. I always thought them to be huge. I somehow secretly wanted hands as large as his. I don’t know if my hands ever got to be quite the size as my grandfather’s, but their size have served a specific purpose in our household for the last two decades—especially since my wife’s hands are decidedly smaller than my own—I am the designated “opener” of reluctant jar lids. Now as many of you know, there are many tricks to the trade of opening jars, especially the most stubborn ones: Repetition, momentum, and when all else has failed—lots of variation. Then as a last straw, brute force, which may involve other objects/tools in the mix. Of course there’s something about being asked to open a jar for your wife that feels almost primitive and yet self-satisfying (as many of us were taught from young that men were the “stronger” sex, unfortunately, and this simply feeds that notion somehow). And though I know she won’t say it, but my wife can’t help but feel self-satisfaction as well for the many-a-time that while sort of admitting defeat (typically not using those words, but more like “this one won’t come off”) I’ve handed back over to her a jar whose lid just wouldn’t budge—and then almost without fail, she places her smaller hand on the jar’s top, gives a little squeeze, and suddenly the top pops off. My face must give it away, but I feel frustrated after all my failed attempts (which typically involves a great deal of groaning and sweating), but Ruth often smiles and says to me, “ah honey, it was all YOUR hard work that got it to finally open,” just to make me feel a little better.

If life were just that easy, when we try and try to get something to open, and it just won’t—if it was as simple as handing it over to our closest friend, our partner, and with one big push—it finally gives way, and opens. Maybe we have been in fact trying to open this jar our entire lives.

In the text we’re looking at today, Jesus has entered a new phase in his ministry. He has turned his focus to those in need outside of his own race—the non-Jews. On the heels of strange interaction where a syro-phonician woman has asked Jesus to heal her daughter who has an affliction. Strangely, Jesus seems to turn her away—telling her that he came to heal the Jews, not the “foreigners”. What is wild about this idea is that it seems to contradict the prophets’ teaching that we are to care especially for the orphans, widows, and foreigners. However, some of us believe Jesus did this to display the attitudes of those around him, the racism that was so pervasive at the time—Jesus indulged it as an opportunity to show that all, in the end, are deserving of compassion. After Jesus told the woman that the children of Israel must eat first, the woman responded that even the dogs eat the scraps from the table. She lowered herself to the position of dog; this is tantamount to self-degradation in order to receive services needed. This certainly can’t be the precedent Jesus wish to set. And I don’t believe it is. I believe by Jesus shifting his focus to many others, like this woman, in the Gentile part of the region—he is in fact showing his followers that God is compassionate to all—and that they should dismiss their prejudices all together. This can be seen in what he does with the deaf and mute man that is brought to him next, presumably a Gentile as well.

And in this case Jesus is quite intimate with him. Mark 7 says that Jesus “took the man off by himself, put his fingers in the man’s ears and some spit on the man’s tongue. Then Jesus looked up in prayer, groaned mightily, and commanded, ‘ephhitha’—Open up. And it happened.” This is a powerful

moment, not being distracted by the strange nature of putting fingers in the ears and Jesus' spit on the man's tongue, actions that we do not understand. However, we can assume that Jesus, if not just symbolically engaging the parts of the man's body that were in the most distress, may have in fact been engaging them on a spiritual level as well—for both parts, the ears and mouth, are the most critical points of the Vishudha, the Throat Chakra—whose purpose, according to the ancient Vedas, is for “communicating one's truth and authentic self.” Jesus, takes this communication center of control into his hands, literally. He prays something from his very core to which the author of Mark can only attribute the words “a mighty groan” to describe it, and then the seemingly magical words “ephphatha” which simply means “be opened” in the language Jesus spoke at the time—Aramaic—which is related to the Arabic word “aftah” today. The root of this word in both cases means to “overcome” or “unlock”. It is as if whatever you're telling “ephphatha” to, you are telling it to be unblocked, let it come forth.

As we try and find our own voice within a sea of voices, our own authentic self among so many who pretend authenticity, how can we come into our own? How can we make our voice heard? How can we feel safe enough with one another that we can authentically speak our truth without fear of judgment? This is the conundrum many of us face in our lifetime—and what most of us seek, to be real, to just be ourselves. Jesus seems to give us a path to this personal freedom. Even though Jesus is healing in the physical, the act clearly can have a spiritual relevance as well. Many of us may feel “blocked up”. Our chakra of vital communication has found itself stifled, perhaps by the structures we navigate, or even by others who may treat our words dismissively—but even we ourselves may be our biggest roadblock in the end. And we crave a moment of intimacy with the divine, a freeing moment in which God touches our ears and tongue and screams “ephphatha!” into our being—“open up!” and then we stop suppressing it, we stop damming it up deep within our soul, instead we finally let ourselves be our true self. We speak our truth. We speak our honesty into existence with truthful words. We articulate what is deep within us. And we are free.

Others of us, need a nudge. We need help. We have been trying to open that jar with the stubborn lid for a long time, and without success. We need to hand the jar over to a close confidant, a partner, a friend, someone we trust—we need to hear them speak “ephphatha” into our lives—to help usher in a surrender that only we can give. And that's where community plays a vital role. Your faith community stands with you, wants to see you free. Wants to see you speak your truth unfettered, uncontrolled, uninhibited. You must be you. As I heard my daughter say to her older brother last night as they were parting for the evening, “You just do you.” This is the ultimate acceptance of reality, to know who you are, to embrace all of you, love all of you, and know God loves you just the way you are. Sometimes, though, we need to be reminded. We need to be supported. We need to be emboldened. I must do me. And you must do you. “Ephphatha!” Be free—be opened!

Join us as we seek to see each of us reach our full potential. As we approach our church's 64th anniversary at the beginning of October, we will also be asking folks to commit or recommit their membership to this community of faith. Whether you feel called to take ultimate responsibility for this church as a Covenant Member or as a Community Member, we ask you to join us on a day-long retreat of prayer, reflection, study, and sharing on Saturday, October 6th. Let us surround each other with love and support, and Ephphatha—be opened together!!

Peace to you all.