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St. James', Mt. Airy
9/9/18

16 Pentecost/Proper 18B
Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
Psalm 125
James 2:1-17
Mark 7:24-37

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

All week long the phrase “*Be opened*” from today’s Gospel has chased after me. It is ripe with meaning and possibility, censure and encouragement.

And it is the culmination of the two healing stories found in today’s passage – two stories that seem unconnected by time and geography.

But what did connect them was Jesus – and just like us, Jesus was formed and changed by his experiences.

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The Syrophoenician woman is one of my favorite stories in all of scripture. I love it because I resonate with the feisty mother who will stop at nothing to protect her child – but I also wonder at it because she is the only person in scripture to match wits with Jesus and come out the winner.

This woman had everything against her when we approached Jesus. She was Gentile, she was a woman – both of which meant she had no right to engage him in conversation. But she was propelled by the possibility of healing for her daughter, and she did it anyway.

Jesus didn't react well – not in a way we'd expect. One Biblical scholar puts it well, saying that Jesus was caught with his proverbial compassion down.¹

Instead of that compassion, what the Syrophenician woman got was what amounted to a racial slur – Jesus looked at her in her desperation, and called her a dog, a Jewish insult for Gentiles.

That should have been the end of the story. The one with power dismissing the one without, putting them in their place so they don't dare step out of it again. But the woman persisted.

Instead of leaving or lashing out in anger – she chose the third way that Jesus so often chose himself: she turned his words back on him, showing him the consequences of his oppressive behavior.

Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

When Jesus had refused to heal her daughter, claiming his mission was to his people only – the Jews and not to Gentiles – she reminded him that God's love is bigger than that, and that so was his mission.

And so, he healed her daughter. But that wasn't the only healing that took place...

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Next, we fast forward from the region of the Decapolis – likely days of travel, though still in Gentile territory. While he was staying there, another Gentile is brought to Jesus for healing, this time a deaf man who had an impediment to his speech.

¹ Amy C. Howe, *Pastoral Perspective, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4.*

We have no way of knowing what Jesus would have done if he had never encountered the Syrophenician woman. Maybe he would have healed this man – or maybe he would have simply seen another dog and moved right along.

What we do know is that Jesus intimately healed this man. He touched him and put his fingers in his ears. He spat and touched the man’s tongue.

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

The man was healed. But that wasn’t the only healing that took place...

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I can’t help but believe that Jesus was healed in the story of these two encounters – that human part of him that was growing a hard edge, that was succumbing to closing itself off from others who were different.

But, *be opened*.

Not just words for the deaf man, but words Jesus proclaimed while looking toward heaven – a reminder to himself to again and again pray to *be opened* – and a charge to **us** to continually *be opened* as well.

For us to **be open** to God at work in the world around us – and in our lives.

For us to **be open** to listening – as Jesus did – to those who speak truth in love to us – and then to **be open** to changing our minds and our hearts.

For our ears to **be open** to truly listen to one another – for healing often begins with being seen and heard – and seeing and hearing can lead to understanding.

In a world that seems focused on *talking at* one another – to *posting at* one another – to **be open** to being in *conversation with* one another (conversation and conversion come from the same root word, after all).

And above all, to **open** our hearts to God’s love – that it may spill forth in our lives, and the lives of all we encounter. For this is how we are healed – and how we help to heal this broken world.

~ AMEN ~