

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY
BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON SUNDAY,
SEPTEMBER 9, 2018

A preacher was completing a temperance sermon: with great expression he said, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river."

With even greater emphasis, he said, "And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river."

And then, finally, he said, "And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I'd take it and

throw it into the river." He sat down.

The song leader then stood very cautiously stood and announced with a pleasant smile, "For our closing song, let us sing Hymn #365: 'Shall We Gather At the River.'"ⁱ

The right words can make all the difference. Ephphatha! This Aramaic word, one of few used and untranslated in the gospel text, tells the deaf and dumb man "Be Opened!" It is very characteristic of Mark that he uses the exact words that fall from Jesus' lips. And it is this word that is key and most significant in today's biblical lesson. Just

how this is true in a bit. First let's look at the story of both healing miracles, beginning with the Syro-Phoenician woman who comes seeking the healer that she has heard Jesus is. She arrives with her young daughter who was possessed by an impure spirit and begs Jesus to drive the spirit from her. "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." A surprising slight, one might say, for someone so compassionate, so holy. It does, among other things, demonstrate that Jesus was a product of his day. That the woman was speaking directly to a

man, alone, and a rabbi at that showed either she did not respect Jewish customs or she decided to ignore them altogether in her desperation to seek a cure for her daughter. Jesus says to her, in short, “you are way out of your league in so many ways! My work is to be among the people of my own house - - the children of Israel, who may consume what they want (remember the bread of heaven speeches of the previous chapter.) So it is not right for me to take what they want and need and throw it to the dogs” (those Gentiles who did not believe in the same ways the Jews did. That Jesus would refer to them as dogs

demonstrates his own prejudices against outsiders to his religious beliefs). So Jesus tells the woman to go where she belongs, lowly and scrap eating beggar that she is.

Yet she is more clever and determined than he had imagined. “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In other words, “am I not a person, am I not worthy at the very least to eat what the dogs are given? Can you not see me for who I am, a mother caring for her child?” Again, Jesus must have been taken aback by her response, as she needs to remind him of a broader mission he is

also called to that invites everyone into the kingdom. Embarrassed undoubtedly, and perhaps ashamed of his short sightedness, Jesus tells the woman to go on her way - - her daughter is healed. And he learns a valuable lesson and is changed along the way. He is opened up - - his mind and soul and heart are opened up - - and he understands the expression of the love of God in this instance. For it is true that God shows no partiality. Jesus had been deaf to this truth until now. It seems that even this late into his mission and ministry that he still personally had things to learn.

The next scene with the man who is both deaf and dumb gives him a moment to redeem himself. Jesus has moved on and made his way back to Galilee, where they brought to him a man, presumably who was also a Gentile, who was deaf and who had a speech impediment, so that he might heal him. And He took him aside from the multitude, and put His fingers in 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 he was healed and too went on his way. “Be opened!” Was he talking to the man, or by extension to the crowd, or

more logically and insightfully, to himself? Jesus had learned a lesson, it seems, from the woman and her daughter. And now, almost as if it were an apology, he heals the man without any accompanying dialogue or strings attached, showing that he now knows what he is to do and how to go about it. Because God shows no partiality, and everyone is open to the healing of the kingdom.

Of course, therein is a lesson for us also. Have we ever thought or imagined that as part of our expression of faith we are called to be broader and much wider in our thinking? You may remember Tevia from the Broadway musical *Fiddler on*

the Roof? Tevia, has a wife and three nearly grown daughters. The oldest wants to get married, but she doesn't want the local matchmaker to choose her husband. Instead, she wants to marry Sidel, the tailor. He's a good Jewish boy. He has a respectable trade, and what's most important, she loves him. Tevia can see the love in their eyes, but he's hesitant not to use a matchmaker. "It's not Tradition!" he protests. Finally, he gives in, and his circle of faith widens.

The second daughter falls in love with a young military officer. They decide on their own to get married. They come to Tevia, not to ask his permission, but his blessing. He can't believe it. "Not ask

the father's permission? Never. It's not Tradition!" At first he refuses, but he loves his daughter, and he wants her to be happy. Again, he bends and stretches his circle of faith. He gives them his blessing and grows a little more.

Finally, his third daughter announces her intention to marry. She has not sought the help of the matchmaker. She is not asking her father's permission. What's more, she intends to marry a Gentile. Her father is crushed. "Marry outside the faith? Never!" Not only does it violate the Tradition, but for Tevia it's wrong in the sight of God. As much as he loves his daughter, Tevia simply cannot stretch any further. He has reached his limit. In a moment of great

tragedy and resolve, he declares that if she marries this Gentile, he will disown her.ⁱⁱ

Now I don't know about you, but I don't want to be like Tevia. I want to be wholly inclusive. And I believe that God is pushing and prodding me more and more each day to see how and if I rise to the challenge. Which leads me to ask "how do you feel God is speaking to you about this kind of vision? Is everyone truly welcomed by you when they walk into this space? Will that be what they most remember about BBCC?" Because if God shows no partiality, then we

should be following God's lead. A good example of what I mean and have been hoping for the example set by the Anniversary Committee in sending out invitations for the 20th Anniversary weekend this coming week. A lot of time was spent in culling old lists to see who might be interested in being invited to the church to celebrate with us. Original members, former members, former pastors, former employees, former and current friends, current attendees, folks who had once spent time at the campground and their families, neighboring clergy, regional officers....Every person we could think of

we considered and sent an invitation regardless of belief or current status. I think when everyone arrives and is in this one place, we will have a greater sense of whom we are and who we are intended to be in the years ahead. And we also remember those who helped pastor the church along the way but are no longer with us: either they've moved and can't be with us today or they have moved on permanently and we will see them at life's end. Finally there are those who have found a different place to worship or who have given up on religion entirely. They too were invited and are always welcome to spend time

with us on Sundays or on whatever day we are engaged in some other activity.

There is a story told to explain how the various world religions all fit together. A group of blind people approaches an elephant. Without seeing the whole elephant, each blind person feels around their portion of the elephant and describes the beast. The blind woman holding the trunk says that the elephant is long and muscular like a thick snake with a rough hide. A blind man holding an ear says that the elephant is thin and flat. Another man gropes around the elephant's massive leg says that the elephant is thick and solid like a tree

trunk. And so on as the group describes the elephant by the portion they feel. Each person adds a new perspective. Only together do they succeed in describing the elephant. This parable is then explained saying that each religion has a portion of the truth about God. They each describe their knowledge and experience of God differently, and together they create a complete picture of God.ⁱⁱⁱ

“This parable is amenable to the current cultural climate in America. Americans today generally value pluralism and mistrust anyone who says they know the

whole truth about anything. This story sounds like a reasonable explanation for the variety of religious traditions around the world. However, the parable is flawed. The principle that underlies this parable is that every religion is essentially true. Can we know this for sure? For the parable to work, you must know what an elephant looks like. You must already know that the trunk is long and muscular, the ears are thin and flat, and the legs shaped like a tree trunk. Then the explanations the blind people offer make sense to form a whole picture. This parable only works if someone knows all about God. An outside observer must first know all there is to know about God and then

compare that knowledge of God to each of the world religions. Only then could we know if the parable is correct.”^{iv}

I don't know all that there is to know about all the world's religions. In fact, despite a broad education, I'd have to say I know fairly little about faiths other than those close to my own. I do wonder how Jesus can be lord of all if not everyone has even heard his name? How can people love God and do what is right if they have never been taught what God expects of them?

The answer is in the Bible. Scripture tells us that God reveals God's own self to all people. People all around the world

share some common knowledge of what God expects from them? The book of *Ecclesiastes* states that God “has planted eternity on the human heart.” And God promised through the Prophet Jeremiah, “I will put my laws in their minds and I will write them on their hearts.”^v Thus what is in our hearts and minds are answerable to God for they are one with God. This is why we know intrinsically the good that is in God’s mind, for we are always drawn to it even when we are not able to practice it. God calls us equally to the task of demonstrating how we are to love another and treat one another; so we must be perpetually open to the task by being living witnesses to this profound truth.^{vi}

It always comes back to love God, love one another. That will set the world straight, will it not?

Amen.

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ⁱ <http://jokes4all.net/sermon-jokes>

ⁱⁱ [https://www. WAS sermonwriter.com/sermons/mark-724-37-the-boundaries-of-the-kingdom-mclarty/](https://www.WASsermonwriter.com/sermons/mark-724-37-the-boundaries-of-the-kingdom-mclarty/)

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.kingofpeace.org/sermons2002-2003/sermon-011203.htm>

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} <https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/scripture-and-tradition/jesus-and-the-new-testament/saint-paul-and-the-epistles/god-shows-no-partiality>